

No Young Man Left Behind

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Many guys who grow up in the church do not continue attending as adults. There are vast numbers of dechurched (people who used to attend church but no longer do) under 40, and the fallout from COVID-19 this year has made it even more likely that a man on the fringes of your church will quit altogether.

I'd like to address two different fronts in this battle: keeping the young men you have and engaging those men to invite their peers who have either quit or never attended church. Here are a few principles from the "No Man Left Behind Model," the backbone of our leadership training for building a disciple-making ministry to men, that can be applied effectively to this challenge.

Principle #1: The Man Code

Create an environment that is comfortable for younger men.

What are some key components of that environment?

Authenticity. Young men need older men to be honest about our flaws and mistakes. We need to point to Jesus as the leader, rather than pointing to a personality or hip speaker. This helps guys feel safe about opening up and asking for help when they need it.

Engagement. Are you more interested in knowing or showing? Younger men don't want to just know a bunch of theological concepts; they want to see how to actually live out the gospel.

Mission. The next step is to provide opportunities to make a difference. Young men are passionate about taking action on the things they care

about. Give them tangible ways to take the principles for living out the gospel and put them into practice.

Approachability. Provide an environment that is approachable and welcoming. You don't have to have a coffee shop in your church lobby. But remember that not everyone is familiar with how church works, so explain things; don't make people feel like they don't fit in.

Principle #2: Create Value

Give young men what they need in the context of what they want.

Young men need the gospel. They need to be discipled. They need to know Jesus.

But men are at all different stages on their spiritual journey. When a man is early in his walk with little or no understanding of the Bible or Christianity—or if he is currently lacking a desire for spiritual growth—you have to cast the net wide. You attract these men by meeting their “felt needs”—their *wants*.

Two of the biggest felt needs I have seen in young men's lives are the need to belong and the need to be good at something—*community* and *competency*. This is evident in popular activities like disc golf, video games, and fantasy football. Guys like to be part of something bigger than just themselves, and they like to make a contribution to the effort.

So if you want to reach a man, figure out what he wants to get good at, and then give him an opportunity to do that in a community. When you first create value for him by meeting his felt needs for fun, recreation, solving relationship struggles, and so on, it creates an on ramp of sorts for deeper needs to be met.

Principle #3: Capture Momentum

Always give men a next step.

Once a young man steps forward to come to something like a BBQ, basketball tournament, car rally, or meet for coffee, be sure to always show him his right next step. Too often we do all this work to get a guy engaged in some activity, and then we don't show him what's next.

If you meet a young guy for coffee to talk, don't leave until you confirm the date, time, and place for the next conversation. When he comes to your paintball day or joins your service project, show him exactly what the next step is and, if possible, get him to commit to it before he leaves. Then text him to remind him.

Principle #4: Sustain the Commitment

Engage younger men in longer-term activities that are compelling and relational.

We need to connect younger guys into the longer-term discipleship opportunities in our churches, but with a very important qualification: they need to be the opportunities that are actually working! Don't send him to that Sunday School class that "just needs a few more people." It's shrinking for a reason.

This might make you uncomfortable, but as men's leaders in the church, we need to triage our discipleship activities. The ones that aren't working are using valuable resources that could be used more effectively elsewhere. Sometimes you can give a leader a new vision and encourage him to change. Sometimes you just have to let an ineffective ministry fade away.

But whatever you do, don't do all the work to engage in a young man's life, get him into relationship with some other guys, and then send him off to some black hole of an activity that will discourage him and drive him away.

Do You Care?

Recently we hosted a discussion panel with leaders from age 23 to 35 and talked about reaching men under 40. As they talked about what it took to engage men in their generation, a consistent theme emerged.

They weren't interested in great speakers, professional worship music, or a ton of programs. They wanted a brother who was more spiritually mature to connect and engage with them. They wanted someone who cared about their spiritual health, their marriage, family, finances, and work.

In the military, the phrase "No Man Left Behind" means that no soldier is left behind. When someone sees a brother wounded or struggling, they go back and get them. To reach younger men, the mature men of your church must commit to being spiritual fathers (or grandfathers) to younger men who are struggling to make their lives—and their faith—work.

THE BIG IDEA: *For your church to truly commit to seeing no young man left behind, you must create a culture of care and connection across generations.*

At the end of the day, if your church wants to reach younger men—while the principles of the No Man Left Behind Model will help you be more successful—you must work to make this a value for all your men. You must inspire, equip, and *expect* your older guys to engage in personal relationships with the younger guys, out of a deep, heartfelt commitment to seeing that *no* man is left behind.