It’s not unusual for parents of teenagers to return home to windows thumping and music blaring—but not exactly the way pastors Jeff and Beth Jones experienced it recently.

“We came home and found our son downstairs in the basement with worship music blaring,” says Beth Jones, co-founders and co-lead pastor with her husband Jeff of Valley Family Church, Kalamazoo, MI (www.valleyfamilychurch.org), “And he’s got candles burning and he’s praying and crying his heart out to the Lord…and he’s a junior in high school! We’re like, ‘What is going on? Oh my gosh...God is up to something!’ ”

Seeing that kind of passion at home and amongst the 18-24 year-old crowd at Valley Family over the past couple of years, with their son but one example, is causing the Joneses to rethink how they prepare the next generation for ministry leadership. A group of 20-somethings are rising up to take the ministry mantle in their church—and it’s a group that requires a different perspective on leadership development.

“We are watching a big generational shift happening in our midst,” says Beth, as she and Jeff celebrate their 20th year of leading Valley Family.

“There seems to be this sense of revival among young people that is reminiscent of the Jesus Movement in the 60’s and 70’s. We marvel at their passion, their boldness, their heart for worship and their heart for the Lord. They are serious about serving God and the vision of the House (of God.)”

Jeff Jones adds that it’s a group that is both deep and wide. “They are very in touch with the needs of their culture” Jeff says. “They’re intuitive in ways that we weren’t at 20. They’re connected with God and their thumbs are definitely on the pulse of what’s happening in the culture.”

As the Joneses build their 3,000-member congregation, they find themselves gravitating toward the younger group and putting systems and initiatives in place to provide “bumpers and guardrails” for them to flourish.

“We want to empower this younger...
generation to go for it when it comes to serving God - more than we're inhibiting them,” Jeff says. “When they bump into something they've never faced, we will say, ‘Hey, let us help you think about it this way.’ They're very open and receptive to learn and adjust.”

“That doesn’t mean there’s not a place for the older generation,” says Beth, “On the contrary, we have a unique opportunity to empower both young and old to work side-by-side in ministry.”

“It’s almost like I can sense that they’re happy we are all doing this together,” Jeff continues. “They’re looking to us for wisdom. They’re not saying, ‘Well, you know, we’re the Joshua Generation and you old guys need to get out because we’re taking over.’ ”

Maybe that’s because Valley Family Church has built tenets such as “We Reach Youth, We Honor Age” into its “Code” (Core Values)—and church leaders are strategically designing structures to raise up the next generation. “We have been communicating to our church the value of reaching and releasing the young generation, while teaching them to honor the wisdom of the older generation - those with age and experience,” Jeff says.

Reverse Mentoring

The Joneses are also employing “reverse mentoring” where they ask for the insight and input of their young, developing leaders - giving them a position to instruct and give input to older, more experienced leaders at staff meetings and Creative Team meetings. “We want them to know we are listening and we trust them. They are very passionate and intuitive when it comes to things like technology, social media, worship, music, humor and what connects with their generation,” Beth says. “Then when we implement many of the things they suggest, they have a real sense of ownership.”

Beth also developed, oversees and mentors a Creative Specialists Team consisting of eight young people (18-24 years) who are gifted in creative arts—music, graphics, video creation, song writing, etc. She meets with the team twice a week for a total of eight hours, and they brainstorm and produce creative elements such as video announcements and promos, songs for weekend services, sets and light design for weekend services and marketing pieces.

“The beauty of the Creative Specialists Team has been the synergy that comes from this team,” Beth says. “Because of their age and ability to ‘get it’ quickly and to use their talents intuitively, they are able to turn projects around quickly. They feel validated that their creative ideas, humor and talents are being used and benefiting the whole church. It’s also a lot like herding cats! They don’t do well with traditional org charts and cumbersome processes; they tend to do better with a high-performance team approach.”
“When the team chemistry is right and the leader loves young people, great things can develop and really creative, moving, powerful things can be created,” she says. (Many of the videos the team has created are at www.vimeo.com/valleyfamily.)

Valley Family also has developed what the church calls its “EPIC Commission,” a 2-year, full-time, in-residence discipleship/internship program for 18-24 year-olds. The EPIC Commission is patterned after many other church internship programs, but also includes college coursework that enables students to earn an Associate’s Degree from a local college.

In addition to college courses, participants receive spiritual mentoring, discipleship, life skills and outreach training. And, they attend a Sunday evening Bible School and serve as apprentices with the church staff. “We have seen wonderful fruit from this ministry,” Jeff says.

For the Joneses and Valley Family, all of these efforts with the up-and-coming generation are setting the church up for its next 20 years of ministry—and laying the groundwork for the future. “We’re at that stage of life now that we’re thinking about, ‘Okay, how can we invest the next 20 years into those who have a burning passion for serving God?’ ” Beth says. “If somebody had said to us 20 years ago, ‘Hey, we recognize the hand of God on you - we’d like to take you under our wing. We’d like to mentor you, invest in you and help you - we would’ve eaten it up. So, maybe we can be those people for this next generation.”

Jeff adds: “We’ve learned a lot through the school of hard knocks; we’re hoping to take what we’ve learned in that school and help young leaders go further, faster - without so many hard knocks.”

Mentoring their Own Children

That includes the four young people that are raising the decibel level in their own home.

“We have been very intentional this past year to talk with, mentor and involve our own children more and more in ministry as they desire,” Jeff says. “We believe pastor’s kids (PKs) are the best-kept secret of the church. We are passionate about helping PKs realize their potential. No one has more history or more vested into any church than the PKs.

“We feel the same way about the young 20-somethings that have grown up in a church. We are doing our best to give them all opportunities to serve—in worship, kids ministry, student ministry, guest services, creative arts, communications, etc. All four of our kids serve in a high capacity in our church—by their choice—and it’s our joy to give them the opportunity.”

About the Author

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