



Young People Are Yearning:
A Conversation with Reggie Blount
July 8, 2026

Mark Ramsey: This is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, and today, along with my colleague Jennifer Watley Maxell, we have the Ministry Collaborative's board chair, Reggie Blount. Reggie, how are you doing?

Reggie Blount: I'm doing great, Mark. Great to have this conversation with you and with Jennifer. Excited about it.

Mark: I can't believe it's taken us so long to get you on. There's so many things we could talk about, but first, can you just tell us a little bit about where you are vocationally and your institution?

Reggie: Happy to do so. I guess I would be one of those persons that they would call "multi-vocational". I am on the faculty of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. I've been on the faculty for almost 30 years, teaching in the area of Christian education, youth and young adult ministry, and most recently in congregational leadership. I also am the co-founder and executive director of a young nonprofit called the Oikos Institute for Social Impact, where we work with congregations who are serving in under-resourced communities and helping them to harness the power of their assets to make greater social impact. And I have the pleasure of serving on the board of Ministry Collaborative.

Mark: Let's pick up the first one of those threads. I would say almost every pastor, if we have any length of conversation about their faith community, asks about youth and young adults. You've done extensive work about this. What would you say to the pastor going, "I don't know what to do about this. I don't know where to go"? Every church wants young people, every church wants young adults, and the imagination often stops right there.

Reggie: Thanks for asking that question. And, you know, it's a complex one, particularly in these days and times when we're coming off of COVID-19. The ground has shifted. The world has shifted. Attendance is not as it used to be, and it is requiring us to think about ministry in more creative ways than what we might've done pre-COVID. So that said, what I have found to be our biggest challenge related to doing ministry with youth and young adults is that we want to focus first on program, and not begin to think about: "What are the actual pastoral needs of young people?"

I have a line that I often share with my students, that "we pastor adults and we program youth". And we don't always step back and recognize that young people need pastors as well. And I'm not just talking about pastors as far as those who are in the role of pastor, who has the official title of pastor. I'm talking about: what does it mean to walk alongside? What does it mean to shepherd? What does it mean to care for? Nurture?

Part of my dissertation and ongoing research is making the claim that young people are yearning for what I would call seven spiritual yearnings. And these yearnings are not new, really that creative, per se. We talk about them in psychology and sociology, but I believe that they also have spiritual dimensions as well. And those seven yearnings, that I believe young people are needing and desiring, is: identity, purpose, intimacy, healing, nurture, mentoring, and courage. And if we gave attention to those seven

spiritual yearnings as we're shaping ministry with youth and young people, I think that we would be moving in the kind of direction we need for the kind of faith formation and identity formation that young people are desiring.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: The first one of the seven things you mentioned was identity. And I think that there are a lot of churches that don't even realize who the young adults are. I hear people talk about Gen Z as if they're elementary school students, and they're in their 20s, they're in their late teens. They are a legitimate adult. They are working in the world. Many of them are living in a world that is very different than the world they anticipated, or, even to be honest, that they were raised for. And when we look at the realities, when we talk about the economics, the sociopolitical landscape, all the things that they are confronted with culturally, not to mention within themselves, their own spiritual growth, one of the questions I have is: What is it that churches can do to start to get a clear understanding and picture of who their young adults are?

Reggie: You know, something as simple as to know their name. I have experienced so many churches that, "that's that young person over there", or "that's that kid over there". Do you know their name? And I'm not really trying to be flippant with that, because part of knowing the name is also knowing the person. Do we identify and see this young person as a true member, part of the community who has their own joys and challenges? And are we taking the time to really get to know them? I know with our adults, we talk about getting coffee with folk, and this, that, and the other, but I think that we need to find ways to get to know young people. Now, I recognize that we've got to make sure that we do all of the right things to keep kids safe and all of that, but we need to find ways to get to know who these young people are, and get a sense of what their life is like, so that we can begin to think about what are the pastoral needs that we need to begin thinking about, that would be of great benefit for the spiritual growth and development of these young people.

Mark: Let's take the last of that list too, courage. Can you, kind of ,unpack that a little bit?

Reggie: So, one of the things that I teach in my...particularly in my youth ministry class, is that if we take the time to look at from a developmental standpoint, all of the things that young people are going through all at the same time – think about it: they are changing neurologically. They're going through some brain stuff. They're going through physiological changes. They are going through psychosocial changes: "I'm trying to discover who I am separate from who my parents are, trying to claim my own sense of self." And, I would say, they're going through spiritual: "Do I even believe in this thing called God? Where am I separate from my parents' belief and my church's belief system?"

And so, when you think about all of these changes happening at the same time, and when you consider the fact that they've never navigated these waters before, it really requires courage to figure out how to begin making sense. And part of that courage comes with having caring adults walking alongside them as they're navigating these waters. Because we as adults have already navigated them, we assume that they have navigated them already as well. And that's just not the case. This is a new adventure for them. This is new waters for them. I used to run a program similar to the program that's at Emory University, the Youth Theological Initiative, in a program I called it Faith Passage. How do we help young people make a faith passage from adolescence to adulthood, recognizing all of the things that they're going to be encountering as they are moving from one demographic aspect to another?

Jennifer: Reggie, you bring so many salient points. And one of the questions I have is: what are some of the resources that churches can access? Where can people find information and get data about what they can do, and how they can get resources to do this work with young adults in their churches?

Reggie: The truth of the matter is there's not a lot of resources out there that are speaking to the kinds of things that I just talked about. Much of the curriculum, much of the resources that are out there, primarily speak to the programmatic aspects: "What can we do to make our youth ministry cool? What's the next latest, greatest thing to make our program attractive that we can bring in more young people?"

Jennifer: And part of the challenge with that is the data tells us young adults don't want another program, that what they're really seeking is belonging. And one of the seven tenets that you named was mentorship. And so, I think that there are some natural places that churches, without having these huge budgets, right? Or without even having a designated, say, young adult pastor, I do think that there are opportunities that naturally flow. If we are a congregation that doesn't have a whole lot of young adults, well, then it doesn't seem like it would be terribly hard to find a couple of adults to mentor our young adults, particularly if we don't have that many of them. But, I think you make this really great point about knowing who's in our congregation. And I think a lot of young adults are kind of invisible. So, what do you think is the main thing that the church is really wrestling with when it comes to young adults? Or even are we wrestling at all?

Reggie: We are wrestling. The question continually gets asked, "How do we get more youth? How do we get more children? How do we get more young adults in our churches?" I think that our vision gets very, very narrowed in scope, because then we're only looking at who's sitting in our pews. And I think that there are opportunities to expand our children's ministry, our youth ministry, even our ministry to and with young adults, if we were to look outside our doors. For a number of our communities, there are children and young people running around everywhere. So, if we really are committed to doing ministry for and with young people, and they may not happen to be sitting in our pews, what about the youth and young people who are sitting right outside our doors? Where are the opportunities to partner with other organizations, whether it be Boys & Girls Club, whether it be the Scouts, whether it be a sports program or whatever, to be able to partner with them, that allows us to provide a spiritual dimension without overly proselytizing or anything along those lines, but to let them know that there are people from that church down the street who care about us, and they're participating and working with us in whatever it is that we're engaged in?

Mark: And it seems to me, Reggie, that, at least in my pastoral experience when I was leading congregations, everyone would talk a good game, and very sincerely. But the answer is that what young people want are the people sitting around that table. They don't want a program. They actually want to get to know people who are living and practicing their faith. And what most churches want, bless their hearts, is to outsource it to a charismatic youth leader, and then say, "Well, we've taken care of that." Is that just my perception, or is there truth in that, or where am I dead wrong?

Reggie: No, I think that you are correct. And our challenge, and this is a challenge for the church broadly, what metrics are we using for success? If all we're doing is thinking about numbers, if all we're doing is thinking about butts in seats, then we miss a phenomenal opportunity to be able to think creatively and be more imaginative about how we, again, engage in spiritual formation and faith formation of young people, whether they are members of our church, or they are those that we have reached out to.

I have come to believe, and it might be naive, that if we really work outside of our doors, if we go outside of our doors and really partner, when people see our true commitment, they want to be a part of something that is really committed. So, even if, in the way back of our heads we're looking for how do we help to grow this church, part of growing the church is going to be committed to the community for which your church is a part of.

I'm reminded, and I find myself sharing this a lot, Jeremiah 29:7: "Seek the welfare of the city for which you find yourself in exile. If the community prospers, you will prosper." And I think that that is the case whether we're talking about ministry to young people, or the work in the ministry of the church in general.

Jennifer: So, just for the sake of kicks and giggles, when we talk about young people, who are we talking about here? Because I remember being in church, almost 40 with three kids, and people inviting me to the young adult Bible study. So, when we talk about young people, who are we really talking about here?

Reggie: So, you're as young as you feel.

Jennifer: Oh gosh. There we go. We're sunk.

Reggie: From a demographic standpoint, we're talking about children, from birth to sometimes 12 years old. Teenagers or youth tend to be from 13 to 18 or 19. Early young adults is that crazy place between 19 and 21. And then, young adults, it varies. Sometimes it's 40, but oftentimes it's 21 to 35.

Jennifer: Part of it, what we're also looking at, is: developmentally, young adults are different. Those of us like me, I'm a Gen Xer raised in the analog world, have certain ways of processing. Younger people do not. So how can churches begin to look at their own biases when it comes to young adults, and maybe confront some of those biases?

Reggie: And so, the answer to that question is, yes, they are different. Again, one of the things that I share with my classes is that we need to look at young people as a different culture. If you were to go to Spain, you would hopefully learn some of the culture of Spain before you get there. That's what we need to do with these different generations. Millennials are never going to be Gen Xers or Boomers. Each generation has a different culture. And so, it's understanding the culture of the different generations, and being in conversation about what the difference is, and some similarities are, too, that helps with that work.

Mark: Reggie, this is incredibly generative, and, I think touches a chord with every pastoral leader who's trying to navigate this. Thank you so much for all your insight, and all the work you continue to devote yourself to in this, and so many other things.

Reggie: Thank you.