"OLDERS & YOUNGERS" BY NOEL HEIKKINEN

At Riverview, our average age is in the mid-20s and that has been part of an intentional effort. When we looked at the face of the American church we realized young people were missing. Since then, it has been our dream to reach teens, college students, singles and young families with the message of Jesus.

This begs the obvious questions, "What about everyone else?"

Answering that question is the purpose of this paper. Hopefully, whether you are a "Younger" or an "Older," this paper will encourage you to be part of our mission to reach young people, both in the Lansing area and around the world.

We all realize how important a family is.

We all grew up in a family and many of us have gotten married and started another one. Some of us have raised our kids, we cried when they left and started another family. The family is central to who we are.

And the Bible says we, as the church, are a family.

For some of us, this is a beautiful metaphor because we came from a loving caring family. For others, we come from a dysfunctional family and so this picture is skewed. But regardless of our background, we all know what we deeply want in a family.

A family should be

- a place where there is an expectation of maturity taking place
- a place where forgiveness is offered
- a place of encouragement
- a place of discipline
- a place of support
- a place where problems are worked out
- a place of identity
- a place of security
- a place of acceptance
- a place of comfort

We all long to be part of a family like that and the church should be there to fill that desire. We are family. The family metaphor is threaded throughout the Bible and it is a multi-layered metaphor.

Whenever Paul led someone to the Lord, he would consider them his children. Hopefully all of us have spiritual children. Then, there is another layer we see in Paul's first letter to Timothy:

> Never speak harshly to an older man, but appeal to him respectfully as though he were your own father. Talk to the younger men as you would to your own brothers. Treat the older women as you would your mother, and treat the younger women with all purity as your own sisters. (1 Timothy 5:2)

Now we are going to address this later, but for now think of it this way. In this family (the local church), we are to treat every older man with the respect due our father; we are to treat every older woman with the love we would have for our mom; we are to treat every guy our age like a brother and we are to treat every girl as our sister.

So check out the multi-layered metaphor: If I lead a woman who is older than me to the Lord, she is my child and I am to treat her like my mom. And here's where it gets really trippy: she is also my sister.

> Romans 8
> 29For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn, with many brothers and sisters.

So basically, she is my child and mom and sister. We are essentially a redneck family. I mention that because it is easy to take a metaphor to an extreme or to mix one metaphor with another and if we do that, we can get a pretty whacked perspective.

In this paper, I want to hit on the most prevalent family metaphor in the Bible: we are all sisters and brothers.

In fact the word "Brothers" appears 220 times in the New Testament, usually in this type of context…

"Brothers, hear me out" or "Brothers, let's not have hit and run accidents in our parking lot." The word "children" appears 96 times, most frequently referring to us as the children of God. I brought up the one verse earlier, here's another few:

> Romans 8
> 15So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family--calling him "Father, dear Father."
>
> Galatians 3
> 26So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

All of us in the church are brothers and sisters growing up together. Some of us are older in age, some of us are younger. Some of us are older in our walk with the Lord, some of us are younger. This is your family and we are all growing up together.

Now, there are two broad strokes of people in this family: Olders and Youngers.

This is all relative, of course. For instance, everywhere I go, people think of me as a "young pastor." I attended a conference filled with pastors recently and there was so much white hair it looked like a box of Q tips and then there was me. Everyone kept referring to me as the "young guy."

But then I meet with Sean (Riverview's High School Staff Guy) and he tells me that I am out of touch. You can't win in the age game: when you are young, people say, "Oh, you are so young," when you're old, people say, "You're out of touch!"

Young and old is relative in some ways; when I talk about youngers, I am talking to everyone because we are all younger than someone. Statistically, there is only one person in our church who is older than everyone, so suffice it to say: you are a younger.

And when I talk about olders, I am talking to all of you because you (except one person), are older than someone.

Besides which, at Riverview, even our old people are young and our old people are young at heart.

As we dive into this topic, I want to start in the book of 1 Timothy.

Here's the context. Paul had recruited this young guy Timothy. Tim was between 18 and 20 when Paul started working with him and after traveling around with Paul for awhile, Paul sent him to Philippi to tell them he had just gotten out of prison. Then, Paul traveled to Ephesus and Timothy eventually joined him there. Then, Paul went back to visit Philippi and left Timothy to help out the church there in Ephesus. While he was there, he sent this intensely personal letter back to Timothy to encourage him as he helped lead this church

Tim was probably now in his early 30s when Paul wrote these letters to him. In fact, if you are young, these two letters should be your life-blood.

Here's a section in chapter 4

> 12Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. 13Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. 14Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. 15Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. 16Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

I am going to start off by giving some advice to those of you who are olders (and remember that is all of you, more or less).

> 12Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young,

I think it is interesting that Paul uses these words because, let's be honest, older people have the tendency to look down on younger people. No matter where you are at in relativity. My seven year old looks down sometimes on my five year old because as she said "I do harder math than you." Overall she is a great kid, but there is this natural tendency we have to look down on those who are younger.

I've seen high schoolers look down on Jr Highers and couples who have been married a year, looking down on engaged couples. I've seen 40 year olds looking down on 30 years olds. It's a vicious cycle!

And that is easy to do in a church like Riverview. Our mission is to make sacrificial followers of Jesus who make sacrificial followers of Jesus who go. Our specific focus is Teens, College Students, Singles, and Young Families. We desire to be multi-generational, while maintaining a young focus, and I gotta tell you, that is hard! But it is vital! I've shared this before, but it bears repeating.

George Barna has plotted the growth curve of most churches and it goes like this. For a while the church grows, then it plateaus, then it goes into a slow steady decline.

Why?

Because people die and churches begin to have more funerals than weddings. Relevant, meaningful ministry for one generation is not relevant and meaningful for the next! So for the Gospel to go out, we must always keep our eyes young: we must pass the gospel onto the next generation!

Here are some scary stats:
Here is average American church attendance, broken down by age group:

78 and older – 52%
58-77 – 50%
39-57 – 43%
20-38 – 28%

This is why we must reach young people! Here are Riverview's stats from last year, not counting the kid's ministry:

14-17 Year olds	7.6%
18-24 Year olds	44.7%
25-29 Year olds	11.7%
30-39 Year olds	17.9%
40-50 Year olds	13.6%
50+ Year olds	4.5%

Our dream is that as we go on, we will keep a high level of young people, but that the other age groups will grow. But that will only happen as older people catch the vision to pass the torch onto the next generation.

And this can't happen if we look down on them!

Here's where we need to be careful. Often, we do cool cutting edge things or we build ministry based on our personal preferences. Then, over time those preferences, those cutting edge things, become sacred cows. They become untouchable. The bottom line of this kind of thinking is that we start to care more about what we are used to or what we want than the expansion of the gospel!

To the 40-year-olds in our church:

"Thank you." I have talked with a lot of you who have sacrificed in many ways to stay a part of this church. You are committed to taking the gospel to this generation.

To the 20-year-olds in our church:

The day is going to come when you are 40 and you are going to this church and you will not like the ministry we are doing because we are beginning to target younger than you. Will you hang on and pass the torch to the next generation like this generation is doing for you? At some point, we need to let Christianity go to the next generation.

Mark Driscoll said this:

"You can embrace your traditions or your children. You're going to have one and lose the other. You can't have them both. God curse us if we choose our traditions over our children."

I think it is natural for us to think our kids are going to see things the same way we do and like the same things we do, but that's not realistic.

I think older people can take one of two positions: they can look down on the youngers or they can have the heart of Paul, who refers to Timothy over and over as "my dear son."

We need Olders like that who will train Youngers. Olders, with experience and character and passion are a history book all dog-eared with the cool things God has done and they must embrace the youngers: training them, loving them, passing the baton on to them.

One great example of this to me is a man in our church, Robin Mosley. Robin has this great heart for youngers and a few years ago, he gathered together his teenage son and a few of his friends to talk and pray. At the beginning, Robin admits it was a bit selfish: he needed someone to pray with and he wanted to pour into his son's life. But over time, this thing gathered some steam and he saw something in these younger guys. They had a camaraderie that he had with guys when he was younger, but he felt was missing for him now. He saw how it was easy to let life get away from you and not have that any longer. In his own words, he said that as he got older it was easier to become self-absorbed with Family, Career, and Marriage. All these things take time and tight-knit community goes by the wayside.

Robin noticed something else as well: these young men were hungering for olders to pour their lives into them. Their group has grown to an average of around a dozen or so, with one other adult joining them. I asked Robin, "What's the biggest benefit to a 40 year old guy to hang out with a 20 year old?" and I expected him to give a big long list, but he didn't .

He said, "I don't think they'd get anything out of it…unless they have a heart to reach youngers and see the gospel passed onto them."

And that's it. It's easy to "put in your time" for Youngers, but do you have the heart of Robin? The heart of Paul?

There is so much that Olders have to offer this generation but it's not going to do any good if you don't have a heart for them and if you don't take the time and energy to sacrifice to pour yourself into them.

We have amazing older leaders in our church and we have amazing younger leaders and we are committed to developing both. And what that means is in different roles around the church--public roles and not so public roles--there will be new leaders emerging on the scene. There will be times that younger, new teachers will come up on stage and teach. Sometimes they will knock your socks off and sometimes they will not.

There will be new people leading the musical worship. Sometimes they will blow you away and sometimes they won't.

But we need to love and mentor them and we need to let them do the ministry. With guidance, of course. With care, of course. With training, of course. But we need to let them do it.

I am not under the mistaken impression that I am a young leader at Riverview. Remember, it's all about perspective. I am older than 70% or more of this church. I have gray hair all over the place. I attended the high school meeting at our church recenently and one of the teenage girls said "Ew! Look at your

nose hair!" I have hair growing out of my nose and my ears! That's supposed to be a grandpa thing, but apparently it's my thing.

I am old.

So because of this, I can give some advise to the youngers (and remember that is everyone in one way or another).

What we need to remember is that God loves to work with young people.

King Josiah was eight years old when he was installed as king and at 26, he led one of the biggest revivals in the history of Israel.

Jeremiah said "O Sovereign LORD," I said, "I can't speak for you! I'm too young!" (Jeremiah 1:6)

Can you imagine? He was a teenage prophet, with the crackling voice yelling "Repent!"

Isaiah started ministry when he was a teenager.

Jesus' mom was a teenager. Jesus was raised by a woman who we probably wouldn't trust to head up a nursery team!

John Calvin wrote a book on Systematic Theology when he was in his 20s.

Charles Spurgeon began preaching at 17.

Jesus was done with His work at my age.

Then there's Timothy. You know, as a young man, he worked with the churches in Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Philippi, and Jerusalem. Imagine being in Timothy's shoes! He jumps in to pastor a church. He is charged to correct them because they had bad doctrine. He's kinda young, He's trying to do his job, preaching and teaching and there's a bunch of people saying, "Oh, that Timmy…he's so cute and young…he's a loose cannon…he doesn't know what he's talking about."

And Paul says to him "Don't let anyone look down on you for being young"

God wants to use young people and older people have a choice: let them or not.

Every young person should have this as their life verse:

> 12Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the
> believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. 13Until I come, devote yourself to the
> public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. 14Do not neglect your gift, which was
> given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.
> 15Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your
> progress. 16Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will
> save both yourself and your hearers.

There is so much advice for you here. Let's go right through the passage:

> 12Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young,

I think it's easy to stop there: "I am not going to let you look down on me!" But Paul doesn't leave it there, he adds the "but." In other words don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, instead, do this: "set an example."

In five areas, be proactive in setting an example. And it starts with "your speech." In Matthew, Jesus warned…

> …whatever is in your heart determines what you say. A good person produces good words from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil words from an evil heart. And I tell you this, that you must give an account on judgment day of every idle word you speak. The words you say now reflect your fate then; either you will be justified by them or you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:34-37)

Your speech reflects your heart! Youngers have this propensity to use harsh language toward their olders; they don't use their speech to be loving or respectful, but to be jerks. Youngers, let me tell you this: nothing undermines your credibility with olders more than your words. The question is: "do you set an example in the way you state your opinion?"

I was in the car once with a teenager who was pulled over for speeding and he called the police officer a jerk. The police officer proceeded to show him what a jerk he could be and he wrote him up for driving 22 miles over the speed limit. Then, when the teen apologized and began to talk with him in a more respectful manner, the police officer changed his tune and even told him how to get out of the ticket.

Remember the verse from earlier?

Here's a different translation:

> Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, - 1 Timothy 5:1

It doesn't say don't rebuke an older man, it says do not ***sharply*** rebuke him. Olders don't respond well to a sharp rebuke, which is a common younger tactic. But appeal…that will get you a long way.

Show an example with "your life." If you espouse a biblical message and live an ungodly life, you are a hypocrite. I like the verse in James that says:

> If you are wise and understand God's ways, live a life of steady goodness so that only good deeds will pour forth. And if you don't brag about the good you do, then you will be truly wise– James 3:13

Here's something to remember: just because you have more years, doesn't mean you have more wisdom. There are 20 year olds that are wise and there are 80 year olds that are fools and people can see it by your life.

Peter writes this:

> It is God's will that your good lives should silence those who make foolish accusations against you. – 1 Peter 2:15

When someone accuses you of something. Specifically, when someone looks down on you because you are young: does your good life silence any accusation they have or does your bad life support it?

Show an example with "your love."

Jesus defined love this way:

> And here is how to measure it – the greatest love is shown when people lay down their lives for their friends. – John 15:13

Paul modeled it. Check this passage out . . . and while you are reading it, ask yourself the question, how does this compare to my life?

> But even if my life is to be poured out like a drink offering to complete the sacrifice of your faithful service (that is, if I am to die for you), I will rejoice, and I want to share my joy with all of you. (Philippians 2:17)

The way you love others, is it like you are pouring your life out for them? What I see in a lot of young people is a deep desire and expectation that other people will pour their lives out for them, especially older people.

Youngers, do you go out of your way to sacrifice and bend for Olders or do you expect them to do that for you? One of the hallmarks of Riverview in the early days was the Youngers were constantly going out of their way to serve the Olders. Now, as I look around the church, I often see the opposite.

Show and example with your "faith."

Here's Erwin McManus:

> *"What does it mean to live by faith? The response of faith is nothing more than obedience. Faith begins with God speaking and materializes when we respond. Somehow we've come to believe that faith removes ambiguity rather than calls us to live in it…The starting point of living by faith is recognizing that God has revealed so much of his will that we have plenty to live by without ever hearing another word."*

One of the most inspiring things is the faith of Youngers. There's something Youngers need to know about us old people: we're set in our ways. We shouldn't be, but we are and no amount of bullying or complaining will get us to move. But when you live a life of faith, when you respond to God in big ways, when you live the exciting life inside of ambiguity, believing in God to come through for you: you remind us of our faith when we were young and it inspires us!

One of the greatest examples you can offer is out of the box extreme faith!

Be an example in your purity.

In our culture, purity is not a common commodity. Someone told me recently that I was fooling myself if I believe that couples at Riverview are not having sex before marriage. I hope that is not true. I hope the young people in our church are being sexually pure because that would be an amazing example to set in this culture.

Guys, how do you treat the young women in this church? Hopefully, you aren't treating this place like a meat market. You better treat them with the same level of purity as you would your sister. Remember that from earlier?

treat the younger women with all purity as your own sisters. (1 Timothy 5:2)

Hear that? Treat her as your sister, look at her as your sister, think of her in your mind as your sister. We all know how creepy it would be to treat our sister as a sex object. Got it? Good.

Set an example in Speech, Life, Love, Faith, and Purity

After Paul hits Timothy with this stuff, he gives a piece of advice that I think is good for all of us, older and younger.

15Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.

It's about progress. Are you making progress? If you are making progress, it will be seen in the fruit of your life. Is your life bearing fruit? I don't care if you are 15 or 50, do you have fruit?

Matthew 12:33 "A tree is identified by its fruit. Make a tree good, and its fruit will be good. Make a tree bad, and its fruit will be bad.

That doesn't mean you are perfect! Remember what Paul said to Timothy?

15Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.

Live a life that people can't criticize because they see the progress you are making. What we hope and pray for is progress. We know that in this room we have Non-Christians, New Baby Christians, Toddler Christians, all the way through full-blown leader Christians.

Some of you are frustrated because you want to be a leader but you are not there yet. You need to be making progress. We are committed to raising our leaders up from within Riverview and there is no magical fast track to becoming a leader here. It's a slow painful process. If you want to be a leader, be prepared. It's not easy.

When I was being raised up as a pastor, one of our other pastors Steve said, "Noel, you are way farther ahead than the rest of us were when we were ordained." It then took another year and a half before the pastors ordained me. And that was wise on their part.

Do you know the percentage of pastors ordained right out of bible college that are out of ministry within five years? Eighty percent.

If you want to be a leader, there is one way to get there. Ready? This is for everyone: Olders and Youngers alike.

What makes a leader?

What is the defining quality that separates a mature Christian from the pack?

I can boil it down to one thing.

They serve.

That's what Jesus did:

> For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many." – Matthew 20:28

Be diligent and serve! Especially with each other. Olders, serve the youngers. Youngers, serve the olders.

DL Moody said

> *"The measure of a man is not how many servants he has, but how many men he serves."*

You want a sobering experience? Ask your closest friends what your reputation is. Are you constantly serving people or are you constantly looking for ways people can serve you? Are you a servant or a mooch?

A lot of people want to lead, but they don't want to serve. I taught at a conference recently that was connected with a church of 15,000. This was a college retreat. So here is this college ministry, and it has a college director. Then there was this guy who was the boss of the college director for this massive church.

And you know what he did at the retreat? He ran a video camera because the production team needed someone to do it.

This leader served.

Quietly, he served in a way no one would notice. But I did and so did God.

A lot of people say "I wanna lead!" Great, then serve.

A lot of people say "I'm gonna serve." Then they don't show up. You know, in almost every area of service ministry at Riverview--Kids stuff, Nursery, Greeters , Coffee Team--the point leaders have to come every week.
You know why? Because they are here filling in for the people who say they want to serve but don't show up.

Jesus said,

> Luke 16:10 - "Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won't be faithful in large ones.

You want to be a leader? Go change poopy diapers in the nursery. Is there a job around here that's not getting done? Do it.

Paul said to Timothy "be diligent so that other people will see your progress." People aren't impressed with your words, they are impressed with your actions. Are you faithful in serving?

And here's my final piece of advice for everyone: it's not just about you.

Olders: you should know that Riverview will (as far as we can see) always focus young. Will you commit to be mission-minded? Will you commit to help us get the gospel to the next generation? Will

you help a Younger to catch a vision for the Christ? Don't know any Youngers? Look around and find one.

Youngers: Will you make this a place where Olders feel honored and served? Will you go against the grain and look for ways to do stuff for the Olders? When you are struggling, will you seek out someone older than you and ask their advice? Don't know any Olders? Look around and find one.

At Riverview, we know we will always have the tension of wanting to be multi-generational, but we are targeting young and we are committed to that. And we're also committed to the dialogue on how to make that work. It's gonna be hard, but will you commit to be there with us?

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