

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

Empowering Gen Z Leaders in the Church (with Chris Hodges & Mark Pettus) - Episode 315

Empowering Next Generation Leaders (Part 4)

Gen Z is now a crucial part of the workforce and on the front lines of ministry. So how can we effectively raise up Gen Z leaders for both ministry and leadership?

In this episode, Tony sits down with Chris Hodges, Lead Pastor of [Church of the Highlands](#), and Mark Pettus, President of [Highlands College](#), to discuss their strategies and advice for identifying and empowering the next generation of leaders.

Interview with Chris Hodges & Mark Pettus

When I think about the short list of churches that are winning when it comes to raising up the next generation of leaders, Church of the Highlands and Highlands College may be at the top of that list. Chris, why are you committed to this part of your mission?

CHRIS: I think solving the leadership crisis is the best problem to solve. Jesus said in Luke 10 that “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” That was true 2,000 years ago and I think it's true today—we have plenty of things that could be done if we had the leaders to pull it off. So whatever pastors or leaders do, it has to include the development of other leaders. I think there's a tendency to just focus on what you do, but at the end of the day, the best fruit of your life isn't what you did, but what you did inside of others.

Chris, we recently had a conversation about the next generation of leaders in the church, and I was encouraged by your thoughts on “calling” with young leaders. Will you unpack what you shared with me and explain why you think this is such a critical part of this conversation?

CHRIS: Right now one of the difficulties is recruiting and attracting the right leaders that are called full-time into ministry. I understand because I experienced this tension in my own life. Paul says, you have to make your calling and election sure, and if you do these things, you'll never stumble. There's a lot of stumbling going on right now with people in ministry. And that's because many times it does turn into a vocational mindset instead of “I'm answering to God for an assignment he gave me.” So I began to ask myself, “Where did I get that call? And where do students today have an opportunity to have that calling?” I came to the conclusion that, a lot of times, those environments aren't in the church anymore.

How is Highlands College working to equip future ministry leaders while also helping them confirm their calling?

MARK: Because of what Chris just talked about, we've inserted moments for students to respond to their calling in our events and conferences for students. It's been powerful to see thousands of students having that opportunity, receiving that call, and then many of them coming to Highlands College. So all of our incoming freshmen have had that kind of experience where they sensed the call of God and a lot of our work is taking that calling, which we know at the core of it is to be a disciple and to make disciples, and helping them unpack that over the four years they're here.

We encourage them to take the pressure off and just continue to pursue your calling: Find the area you're passionate about. Learn everything you can. Go above and beyond that, learn from other areas, and then trust God with it. Your twenties are going to look one way. Your thirties may look a completely different way. But ultimately God's going to be faithful to take you to that ultimate destination.

CHRIS: That's true because it evolves. I thought I was going to be a missionary to France. Then I ended up in youth ministry for 11 years and said I'd never be a senior pastor. So your calling does evolve, and I always remind the students that Jesus didn't even start his public ministry until he was 30. So what was he doing?

Luke 2:52 says he was growing; he grew in wisdom, stature, favor with God, favor with man. So I tell our students: You don't have to know. You just have to grow.

We also believe that when you develop people, it has to be holistic. So academics is important, but it's only one fourth. There has to be character development, physical development, etc. So on the day our students graduate, they have 800 hours worth of experience, character formation, and spiritual development.

What are some of the unique characteristics you see in this next generation of leaders?

CHRIS: Every generation has distinctives that make them different from the previous, but at the core, they just want somebody to believe in them. Probably one of the greatest values I've learned about developing people is you have to see people through the lens of faith. It's seeing things not as they are, but as they could become, and then speaking that into them.

One thing I've learned is that people tend to become what the most important people in their life think they'll become—good or bad. Our lives are shaped by relationships. When the people we admire speak things into us, it's powerful. You tend to take on the nature of what was spoken into your life, and that's why we have to be very careful with our words because our words have the power of life and death.

So at the end of the day, this generation is different, but they're the same, too. They have this hole in their heart, and it's not for money or marriage or career; it's for purpose. It's to do something that actually matters. When you connect them to that, then you have a disciple. You have people that drop their nets and follow.

MARK: I think something else that's important that we're really focused on right now is teaching truth in a generation that is so confused. They're so hungry for that. When you open the Bible up, there is a hunger in them that I've never seen before to say, "Hey, can you unpack that verse? Can you help me with this theology? Because I need a place that is solid to land."

What are some of the challenges GenZ leaders are facing as they try to take on leadership roles in churches? How can those of us in the older generations help them with this transition into leadership?

MARK: What we're seeing with Gen Z is that they need leaders that are more rabbinical in nature—who are willing to come alongside them and shepherd them, to lead them and to help them not just know "what," but "why," meaning, don't just tell them what to do; tell them why it's important. I think the best leaders right now for Gen Z are mentors. There is so much innovation and so much entrepreneurship inside of them and they love to be empowered. Of course, make sure there's clear accountability and structure, but early on, empower them. So I think a mentor/rabbinical relationship with an empowering mindset creates the perfect environment to tap into the resources of their generation.

Yes, it's going to be a little messy, especially early on. They don't always trust institutions and oftentimes, they don't trust leaders. But when you stick with them, especially through a hard situation in their life, and you don't give up on them, you have won them for life. I think there's a lot of opportunity for them to be one of the greatest generations of leaders.

Not every church is going to start a college like Church of the Highlands, but what are some baby steps that everyone could take to begin developing future leaders?

CHRIS: Just start with one small group. From day one at Highlands, we had a few small groups: I had a group of businessmen, I had a group of men going through emotional struggles, I had a group of interns. Some of those people are now leading major ministries in our church and others are just world-class leaders today. It was a very raw, basic form of development, and God did more work inside of them than I could have ever done. So you don't have to have big things to do big things. You don't have to have a lot to do something that's important.

Jesus modeled this: His public ministry really wasn't that effective because the crowd went away not knowing what the parable meant. It says they left in amazement. But then the Bible says he brought his disciples off to the side and explained the parable to them. My question for every leader listening is: Do you have a group of disciples that you're explaining the parable to after

Sunday? Everybody can have an impact in someone else's life. If we all do it, we will make a better, bigger impact than any university or college could.

I love the picture of a combination of learning, watching and practicing in Philippians 4:9. What are some practical steps we can be taking as pastors to help young leaders experience all three?

MARK: I love that you brought that up because we've used that as the model for Highlands College. Students are getting their core academics, but then, within their major focus, they're getting the environment you just described: They're seeing experts do it, they're doing it *with* experts, and they're getting the opportunity to step out and be empowered to do it themselves.

Pastor Chris models this so well. For example, we see him preach a sermon on stage Sunday morning, but after that, he's meeting with some of us in a smaller room, helping us learn his method, his mindset, the best techniques, and then empowering us to go do it. I think it's important for every leader to have those "after-Sunday" or "around-the-office opportunities."

Going back to Gen Z, that's what they're looking for: They don't just want to attend, they want that extra effort, so create these environments for young leaders to jump in.

If we invest in that even a little bit, the compounding effect of that will be more opportunity, more influence, and more leaders to reach our city.

CHRIS: That's right—it doesn't have to be complicated. Here's a great, simple takeaway: never minister alone. If someone asks for prayer, have someone pray with you. If you go to the hospital, bring somebody with you. If you go on a mission trip, bring a group of students with you. Take advantage of the opportunities that already exist.

Chris, as we wrap up this conversation, what words of encouragement do you have for other pastors and church leaders who are listening in to this conversation?

CHRIS: Everybody can do this. You don't have to have great skills or be a large church to do this. It can be so simple. So I would encourage every pastor: I know we all want to do great in our own ministries and achieve a certain level of God-honoring success and do what God's called us to do. But the greatest success you have is a successor.

So call someone. Text someone. Encourage someone. Go to lunch with someone. Your life will be multiplied. The first words out of God's mouth to mankind is "be fruitful and multiply." And he wasn't just talking about having kids, he was talking about us having a generational impact.

Key Takeaways

Our words are powerful. As leaders, we have to speak into the lives of those young leaders who God has placed in our care. We have to tell them what we see in them that they may not yet see in themselves. This is part of our calling to equip God's people to do the work of God.

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