

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

EDITOR: CYNTHIA WOOLEVER—WWW.THEPARISHPAPER.COM

September 2015—Volume 23, Number 9

Copyright © 2015 by Cynthia Woolever

CAN CONGREGATIONS REACH YOUNG ADULTS?

A recent national study of more than eleven thousand congregations identified worshipping communities that are successfully engaging young adults.¹ When 20 percent or more of a congregation's active participants are between eighteen and thirty-four years old, the researchers designated the church as having significant young adult participation. They found that only 16 percent of all U.S. congregations met this threshold criterion. Thus, the study concludes that high young adult participation rates are *not* typical for American congregations.

Most young adults are not hostile to organized religion, but the majority of them are unaffiliated and many describe church as irrelevant to their lives. Still, a broad range of faith groups found ways to minister to this important demographic.

Understanding Proximity and Demographics

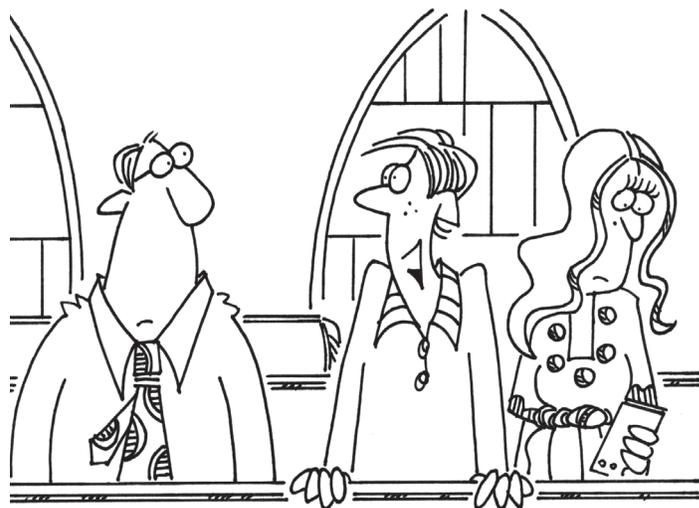
Why aren't congregations reaching more young adults? Unfortunately, some reasons fall outside the local church's control.

Reason #1: Proximity to young adult populations. The congregations with the highest rates of young adult participation are located in areas with higher concentrations of young adults. For example, congregations in newer suburbs, urban areas, and older suburbs drew more young adults than the national average for all congregations. Yet congregations in rural areas and small towns had lower than average percentages of young adult participants (only 12 percent reached the criterion threshold). The region of the country also plays a part, with the highest percentages of young adult-populated congregations in the West and the lowest percentages in the Northeast.

Reason # 2: Age of the congregation. Newer congregations—those organized in the past ten years—were three times more likely to reach the threshold of significant numbers of young adults. This association suggests that planting new congregations designed to draw young adults is a one strategy for reaching this population.

Reason # 3: Racial and ethnic diversity. Congregations where most members are from one or more ethnic minority groups attract more young adult participation (22.5 percent have a significant young adult presence). However, congregations comprised of all white members have lower young adult participation rates than the national average (less than 13 percent of these congregations meet the threshold criterion of one in five young adult participants).

Reason # 4: Delayed marriage and childbearing among young adults. Demographic shifts in the age of first-marriage (the average age is increasing) and the number of children (to fewer or none) are powerful factors for predicting church attendance. If church programming aims at meeting the needs of married adults with children, growing numbers of people do not share those interests. Innovative congregations can offer social and institutional support for single and childless younger adults.²



FLETCHER

"WE'RE EAGER TO PRACTICE OUR FAITH...
PREFERABLY IN A HYMN-FREE, NON-CHURCH VENUE
WITH GREAT COFFEE!"

Understanding Young Adult Preferences

Regardless of age, people prefer to join and participate in a healthy and thriving congregation. Nevertheless, some practices appear to be especially central for attracting young adults. In her summary of literature and research, Dr. LiErin Probasco summarizes four practices that speak to young adults.³

A compelling core identity. Congregations with higher young adult participation clearly articulate their central mission, grounding it in a particular faith tradition. The congregation's vision speaks to who they are collectively, to personal identity, and is responsive to the local community context. Because young adults are experiencing an unstable stage of the lifecycle, congregations can assist in personal identity and faith formation.

A mission of inclusion. The sense of inclusion surfaces in at least three ways. First, young adults find the congregation to be accessible because it meets them where they are in terms of their religious knowledge and commitment. The congregation accepts their diverse religious experiences and backgrounds and offers multiple points of entry into church life. Practically, this means that the congregation offers various worship times and formats, study groups, social gatherings, and volunteer opportunities.

Second, research shows that young adults find congregations that include people with diverse religious and social backgrounds most engaging. These young adult church magnets exemplify some form of diversity that sends the message—we are a place that welcomes everybody.

Third, congregations successfully engage young adults by inviting and mentoring them into leadership positions. These roles should be visible and critical to the congregation's mission. All young adults need to feel that they have the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process about the future.

A goal to inspire. High quality worship experiences especially appeal to young adults. Liturgy and sermons that inspire, offer hope and insights about coping with everyday life, and motivate people to grow in their faith attract younger adults. The congregation can be a community of support and challenge for those trying to grasp who they are and what kind of adults they hope to be. Many congregations in the study offered worship that engaged both the “brain and body,” often emphasizing the arts and music.

A drive to innovate. While drawing on the continuity of historical ways of practicing faith, young adult-populated

congregations found that they could still change customs by not doing things the ways they have always been done. In the non-core aspects of church life, congregations creatively linked the social with the spiritual. Small groups meet in coffee shops and other non-church venues. In some churches, informality happens at a completely new level when “events” are not named. Finally, innovation and flexibility is displayed in extra-congregational ventures, such as college campus ministry or volunteer opportunities in faith-based agencies; for example, see the coffee-house operated by the National Community Church in Washington, D.C. (<http://ebenezerscoffeehouse.com/>).

Answering Tough Questions

Congregations with a vision to do more effective ministry with young adults face a difficult self-evaluation. Reflecting on these questions could lead to positive next steps.

- How many colleges and universities are located within fifteen miles of our congregation? What is the total student population? Do we have any relationships with these institutions, faculty and staff, or students?
- Do we offer hospitality specifically created for young adults (including single, married, and with or without children) in our church facilities or off-site?
- Do young adults perceive our church as authentic and non-judgmental?
- What groups of young adults are marginalized in our community and/or lack the support of family networks? How are congregations failing these and other young adults?
- Does our social media use help us build relationships with young adults?⁴
- How will young adults hear about our congregation and what it has to offer?

1. Monte Sahlin and David Roozen, eds., *How Religious Congregations are Engaging Young Adults in America* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, 2015).

2. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

3. LiErin Probasco, “A Review of Previous Research,” in Sahlin and Roozen, 25-51.

4. See Ed Stetzer, “Why Your Church Should Be On Social Media Right Now,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/february/why-your-church-should-be-on-social-media.html>.