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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Are We Making a Place for the Next Generation?

Congregations repeatedly declare people in their 20s and early 30s “missing persons.”

Scholars debate whether the absent members of Generations X and Y (born 1962-1986) will return later in their lives to basic religious practices, such as attending worship services. Some leaders believe that young adults in their 20s and 30s are simply at a busy life-stage and will resume their religious involvement in the next decade.

Regardless of the “why,” should congregations just wait it out, hoping that some day these missing persons will appear?

Intelligent congregations organize a search party. Contrary to the often-lamented trend of absentee young adults in the 20s and 30s age bracket, many congregations attract people of that age with great success.

A recent study explored the practices of congregations that attract numerous young adults.¹ What can we learn from these congregations’ success with the twenty-something demographic group and the life-stage issues they face?

Diverse interests and life situations. The 20s and 30s mark times of transition—finishing school, moving out of the family home, making professional and career choices, taking first jobs, and often, marriage.

Given this diversity, any program or effort must honor the uniqueness of each person’s situation. Young adults want to be seen as valuable participants *as they are*.

The biggest *faux pas* that congregations make with this demographic group is assuming that all young adults are looking for a marriage partner. Even if their deepest hope is meeting a potential partner, most members of this demographic group avoid “singles only” events. Emphasis on coupling shouts to this demographic group, “You are inadequate as you are!”

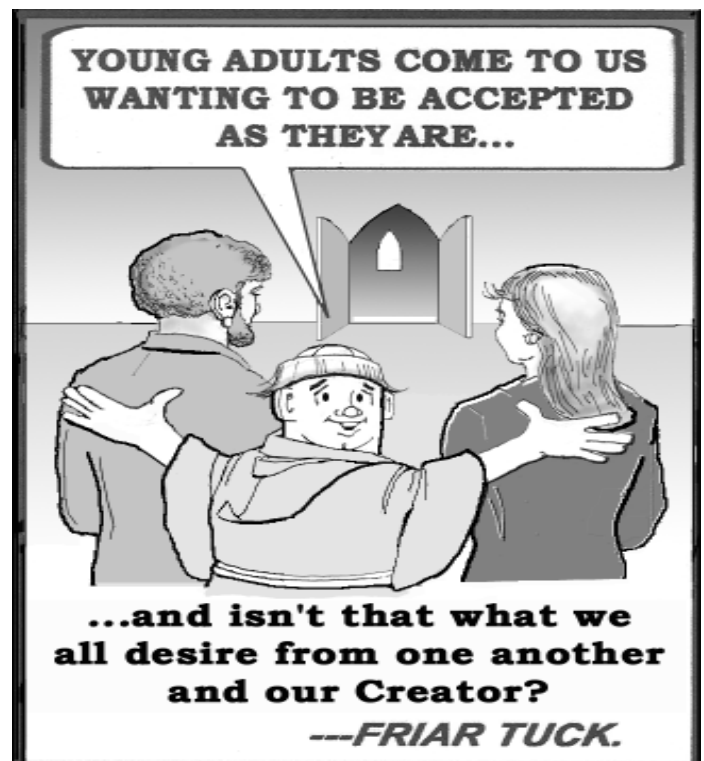
“Spiritual but not religious.” While 20s and 30s adults mirror the other adult age groups in defining *institutional affiliation* and *faith* as separate issues, they differ in the strength of this view.

This generation especially feels free to affiliate or not, attend or not, make financial contributions or not. Congre-

gations and secular organizations can no longer count on a sense of obligation or traditional religious mandates to motivate behavior. Religious affiliation and religious belief no longer neatly bundle together in America. Most young adults do not believe that organized religion is the only path to experiencing God. Thus, individuals in their twenties look for a *community of people* with which they can deeply relate—not an institution in which they can become official members. Inflexibility and judgmental attitudes regarding spotty participation shouts to this demographic group that they are inadequate *as they are*.

“Show up and watch” is not their style. Generations X and Y reject the “sit and absorb” model in almost every situation that they find personally rewarding.

Many congregations that successfully engage young adults offer a sermon-discussion group following services. The conversations are informal, wide-ranging, and supportive. Congregants feel free to question the minister and each other about theology, sources, and practical application. Partici-



pants in these discussions accept the limited knowledge of others about biblical stories, faith practices, and terminology. In these give-and-take discussions, leaders value all opinions and insights. (When congregations fail to see the importance of discussion opportunities, they shut out some Generation X and Y young adults, unintentionally signaling that they are inadequate *as they are*.)

Encouraging young adults to assume leadership positions also engages them and promotes a sense of ownership. The most elementary step is to involve young adults in creating and running their events and activities. An additional step in larger congregations means hiring one of these young adults as a staff member whose job description is young-adult ministries.

Successful strategies employ a mix of social and educational/spiritual events, often mixing the social with the spiritual in one event. Staff or older volunteers that create programming for young adults without young-adult involvement *implicitly suggest that young adults are not capable of this level of leadership*.

Young adults should serve on the governing board, financial committee, and other critical congregational decision-making groups. Again, withholding young-adult entry to leadership at all levels of congregational life sends the message that they are inadequate *as they are*.

Never talk about numbers. Emphasize quality over quantity, whether the topic is people or programs. Recognize the unique gifts of every young adult and the contribution they make to the congregation. Make it clear that the congregation's primary concern is the *quality* of each member's spiritual life. When leaders and members moan about the small number of young adults in the congregation, they shout to the two or three participating young adults that they are inadequate *as they are*.

Methods that make a place for young adults. What are some of the common strategies used by congregations that successfully engage younger adults?

(1) *Provide multiple entry points.* Young adults begin participating through a mission or service activity, social event (e.g., movie and discussion night), or small-group study. Attending a worship service is frequently not the first contact with the congregation.

(2) *Individualize expectations.* Adults in their 20s and 30s go where they feel comfortable. Some leadership styles alienate young adults because they assume that (a) one size fits all or (b) free thinking and individual choice collides with authentic faith. As the research study indicates, successful congregations "created an atmosphere where young adults can learn about their faith without feeling shame about their lack of knowledge." Discipleship takes time to root. Older members should practice rather than preach what mem-

bership means. Recognize that some young adults are *seeing* what is involved in membership for the first time.

(3) *Communicate electronically.* Use a Website to post an activities calendar. Send an electronic newsletter to all present and prospective young-adult participants via E-mail.

(4) *Hire staff for young-adult ministries or recruit committed lay volunteers.* In either case, the individual(s) must be Generation X or Y to send a clear message that "we see people in your age group as competent religious leaders."

(5) *Offer a service designed especially for young adults.* Involve young adults in determining the best day and time (hint: 11:00 a.m. on Sunday is not the best time in communities where many young adults work on weekends; 6:00 p.m. Saturdays also works well). Include music that speaks to Generation X and Y—and is participatory. Again, the research indicates that "young adults welcome opportunities to feel emotionally affected." Asking young adults to be worship leaders is another avenue for participation.

(6) *Take into account multiple interests and motivations.* Some 20s and 30s adults value a sense of belonging; others want to explore their spirituality; some need emotional guidance and support; some seek networking opportunities; and a few are looking for a life partner that shares their values.

(7) *Extend warm hospitality and invest in relationship building.* For example, older members invite young adults to their home for meals. Since many young adults live away from their families, they welcome being "adopted" for a day.

(8) *Work at integrating young adults into all aspects of congregational life.* Programs that fail to create intergenerational bridges do not work.

Generation X and Y adults are not "youth-group graduates." They are the generation that the congregation needs today *as they are*.

¹ Tobin Belzer, Richard Flory, Brie Loskota, and Nadia Roumani, in "Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation" in *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, James L. Heft (ed.) Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006.