



# Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation

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Most people involved in faith formation would agree that ministry with young adults is filled with much uncertainty and angst. In this present day and age, we all must grapple with a new and evolving technological age in which a thirst for instant gratification is always in the foreground. These aspects of our American culture are well on the minds of many ministry professionals as they attempt to evangelize and serve the needs of young adults in their ministry. At the same time the diverse needs of the two generations that now fall within the classification of young adulthood—Generation X (born 1964-1979) and the Millennial Generation (born post 1980)—have caused a chasm in the focus of this ministry. This is not necessarily a new occurrence, but rather something that can be explained by comparing recent trends in the development of young adults.

## Young Adults and Religion

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In *Gen X Religion*, Richard Flory analyzes fifteen congregational case studies of churches who minister to young adults, and identifies five major characteristics of Generation X religion.

1. Generation X religion emphasizes the sensual and experiential, combining the sacred and the profane and incorporating text, image, music, dance, and the body as venues for the expression of religious beliefs.
2. Generation X religion is entrepreneurial in finding cultural and institutional space to create new religious expressions based on their existing lifestyle interests.
3. Generation X religion is, on the one hand, similar to Baby Boomer religion in that it emphasizes personal identity, religious experience, and spiritual seeking; but it differs in that it roots the quest for religious identity in community, rather than a more purely personal spiritual quest.
4. Race, ethnic, and gender diversity and inclusiveness is an explicit goal of Generation X religion.
5. There is an insistence on an “authentic” religious experience in Generation X religion, both on the part of the individual and as found in the religious communities that GenXers choose to join, that acknowledges the ambiguities, trials, and successes of life. (Flory, 234-235)

Robert Wuthnow, in his study of research on younger adults (20s through mid-40s), *After the Baby Boomers*, describes the young adult approach to religion and spirituality as *spiritual tinkering*, which he finds quite common among young adults today, and predicts as much for the future. He describes a tinkerer as a person who “puts together a life from whatever skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand. . . Their approach to life is practical. They get things done, and usually this happens by improvising, by piecing together an idea from here, a skill from there, and a contact from somewhere else (Wuthnow, 13).

Spiritual tinkering is a reflection of the pluralistic religious society in which we live, the freedom we permit ourselves in making choices about faith, and the necessity of making those choices in the face of uprootedness and change that most young adults experience. It involves piecing together ideas about spirituality from many sources, especially through conversations with one's friends. Spiritual tinkering involves a large minority of young adults in church shopping and church hopping. It also takes the form of searching for answers to the perennial existential questions in venues that go beyond religious traditions, and in expressing spiritual interests through music and art as well as through prayer and devotional ready. (Wuthnow, 135)

Tinkering is evident among the large number of young adults who believe in God, life after death, and the divinity of Jesus, for instance, but who seldom attend religious services. Their beliefs lend continuity with the past—with the Bible stories they probably learned as children—and their behavior lets them adapt to the demands of the present. Spending a weekend with friends, buying groceries and doing the laundry, or getting ready for a hectic week at work takes precedence over spending yet another Sunday morning at worship. Tinkering is equally evident in the quest to update one's beliefs about spirituality. The core holds steady, persuading one that the Bible is still a valuable source of moral insight, for example, but the core is amended almost continuously through conversations with friends, reflections about unusual experiences on vacation or at work, or from a popular song. (Wuthnow, 215)

## Young Adult Participation in Church Life

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### Decline in Church Participation

The historical lack of young adult presence—including the gifts and talents that young adults offer the church—at Sunday worship have been heartbreaking losses for churches since the turn of the new millennium. Truly, it is a tragedy that too often this generation has been written off as unreachable. Even worse have been the attitudes of both clerical and lay ministers that assume young adults will return to the church as they mature or

gain more life experience or simply marry and rear children. The sad truth is that this has not been true for at least the past decade. Research conducted by Dean Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson and Juan Gonzalez in 2001 states it simply: "Growing older by itself has no overall effect in pushing basic values in one direction or another. We should not expect that today's young people will come to resemble today's older adults when they mature" (Hoge et al., 60-61).

Many Catholic young adults continue to identify themselves as Catholic, and as Hoge and his colleagues point out, they "cannot imagine being anything other than Catholic" (Hoge, et al., 218). Yet,

the evidence suggests that young adults are only loosely tethered to the Church. Barely half say they would never leave the Church. Only four in ten say the Church is the most important part—or one of the most important parts—of their lives. Only one-fourth goes to Mass on a weekly basis. Less than half believe that the teaching authority claimed by the Vatican is very important... And if a sizable number of young adults report that they do not understand their faith well enough to explain it to their own children, they have a problem, and so does the Church. (D'Antonio, et al., 83)

According to a survey conducted by LifeWay Research, seven in ten Protestants—both evangelical and mainline—ages 18 to 30, who went to church regularly in high school, said they quit attending by age 23; and 34 percent of those said they had not returned, even sporadically, by age 30. That means about one in four Protestant young adults have left the church. *Interestingly, the survey found that those who stayed with or returned to church grew up with both parents committed to the church, pastors whose sermons were relevant and engaging, and church members who invested in their spiritual development.*

There are plentiful opportunities for young adults to reconnect with the church. Yet utilizing these opportunities requires an understanding that the disconnect stems from several different sources, including an expectation of immediate gratification, high mobility, the demands of the world eclipsing those of spiritual needs, and a failure to capitalize on young adults moments of return to the church (marriage, a child's baptism, or death of a parent). Additionally, the rise of terrorism and violence in a world that seems to have gone mad has harshly marked the Millennial generation's religious landscape. A quick glance at current events in their

lives over the course of their late teens and early adult years paints a tragic picture: Columbine, September 11, 2001, the Indian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and the shootings at Virginia Tech, among others. Combine the horror of living in this precarious time with the fact that this was the most watched over generation in recent history, and there's no surprise that a need for certainty emerges.

Their Gen X counterparts, who are at the upper age range of today's young adults, often do not share the Millennials' views on the importance of certainty. Gen Xers, already at an age where they have formed and re-formed their sense of whether the world is a relatively safe place or not, have been able to more appropriately navigate the ambiguity of the recent tragedies. Moreover, they often depend on their friends and close mentors to help them muck through the tough times of these events. Because Gen Xers were the first latchkey kids and often, children of divorce, the world has always been a rather harsh and unfriendly world. For many the attitude that nothing or no one can be trusted has always existed. Their lack of affiliation with any institutional church (or any institution, in general) has always been a hallmark for them. Institutions, be they familial, civic, or religious, are always looked on with suspicion.

In the study, *Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation*,<sup>1</sup> Belzer, Flory, Roumani, and Loskota make it clear that

Organized religion in the United States is on the threshold of a seismic shift. Today, religious and community leaders are witnessing a crisis in the transmission of religious memory, practice, and tradition to the next generation. In major urban centers across the United States, there is a generalized perception that individuals in the twenties and early thirties constitute a "black hole" in congregational life. Members of the young adult population are simply missing from most churches, synagogues, and mosques.

Religious and community leaders are given to lamenting about the throngs of young people who are "spiritual but not religious" as a way to explain young people's absence from organized religious life. (Belzer et al., 103)

## Who Does Participate?

The decline in young adult involvement in church life is well documented. But who does participate? From an analysis of research studies we know that:

- Young adults are less likely to participate in religious services than they were a generation ago.
- Church attenders between age 21 and 45 are disproportionately female (66%).
- Young adults in their twenties are poorly represented among regular church attenders.
- Those who do populate the pews are an increasingly skewed cross-section of young adults. They are married (60%), whereas the unmarried scarcely frequent congregations at all. Currently the typical church attender is married and has children, while the typical non-attender is single and does not have children (Wuthnow, 68).

In *Young Adult Catholics*, Hoge, Dinges, Johnson, and Gonzales developed a profile of the most involved Catholic young adults who go to Mass weekly and are active in parish life. The parish-involved Catholic young adult (8% of all the young adults studied) not only is involved in parish life, but also religious in every other way. "These people are higher in belief in traditional doctrine, more loyal to the Catholic Church, more likely to take part in Scripture study groups and prayer groups, more likely to have private devotional practices, and more likely to go for private confession" (Hoge, et al., 75). The research uncovered several key practices or behaviors of involved Catholic young adults. They

- participate in a Scripture study group (36% in the past year);
- participate in a prayer group (36% in the past year);
- pray daily (62%);
- have three or more of their five closest friends in the same parish (33%);
- made a retreat or day of recollection (46% in the past two years);
- participated in private confession (64% in the past two years); and
- read the Bible at home (73% in the past two years) (Hoge, et al., 76).

These young adults have also been involved in a parish ministry in the past six months; the largest portion were working in the religious education program or on a parish committee.

## How Do Young Adults Choose a Congregation?

In the study *Congregations That Get It* the researchers found that young adults “exercised typical American individualism as they decided about associating with religious communities, sometimes participating in more than one simultaneously” (Belzer, et al., 106). The research team identified the following factors influencing young adult’s participation in a faith community.

- choosing a specific community, rather than committing to a larger denomination;
- making choices based on a number of factors, such as interpersonal relationships, worship style, geographic location, opportunities for involvement, and accessibility of leadership;
- deciding how often to attend and the extent of their participation;
- choosing how much of the official teachings to accept and how much ritual observance to practice;
- balancing their individual authority with their identity as members of a community and religious tradition;
- seeking a community where there is both flexibility and structure;
- being experientially engaged as opposed to a “show up and watch” style of religious participation; and
- building interpersonal relationships with people who express and explore their religious identities in similar ways; relationship building was a fundamental aspect of young adults’ congregational experience (Belzer, et al., p. 106-107).

The LifeWay research affirms many of the same findings. Young adults are longing for community and fellowship with peers, looking for ways to reach people in need, and circling the church but not always finding a home in it.

- Connection is the key. Community with other young adults is extremely important in their lives.
- Young adults seek authentic answers in the Bible and Christian tradition, best learned through participation in small group meetings.
- Making a difference is essential by having the opportunity to meet the needs of others on a regular basis. Social action is cited as the major reason uninvolved young adults would consider being part of a church.

## Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation

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While there is very little research on best practices in young adult faith formation, this article will draw on the recent research study, *Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation*, and pastoral experience to identify best practices that can guide congregations in the development and/or expansion of young adult faith formation. The *Congregations That Get It* study focuses on fifteen Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim congregations who are engaging young adults in congregational life. While they differ organizationally, they share numerous characteristics in terms of approach. In this section we report the major findings. In the final section of the article we suggest practical strategies for the faith formation of young adults.

### Best Practice I. Congregations recognize that young adults make an important contribution to congregational life.

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#### Research Finding: Young adults want to feel that their presence is valued.

Those who are interested in congregational life are aware that they are exceptional—they know that the majority of young adults are not interested in religious affiliation. As such, those who participate want to be acknowledged for their unusual commitment and interest.

#### Practices: What do congregations do?

- Congregations facilitate regular intergenerational communication between congregational members, staff, and leadership.
- Congregations provide physical space within the place of worship for young adult programs.
- Congregations specifically designate funding for young adult ministry, underwriting activities or reducing fees for activities and not turning away anyone for lack of funds, thus acknowledging the importance of young adult participation.
- Congregations hire a specific staff person to coordinate young adult programming.
- Congregations regularly and frequently show appreciation for young lay leaders.

**Best Practice 2. Congregations engender a sense of ownership by enabling young adult congregants to create and plan their own events, and by making leadership positions—both within their peer group and within the larger congregation—available to young adults.**

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**Research Finding: Young adults want a sense of ownership in their congregations.**

They value opportunities to assume leadership roles within their peer group and welcome chances to move into leadership in the larger congregation.

**Practices: What do congregations do?**

- Congregations frequently recognize the contributions of young adults and encourage their continued involvement.
- Congregations also purposely engage, and even hire, young adults to serve as staff members and educators as a way to engage them in numerous aspects of congregational life.
- Congregations organize committees that are led by young adults.

**Best Practice 3. Congregations offer multiple points of entry and numerous arenas for young adults to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.**

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**Research Finding: Young adults' interests in religion are multifaceted.**

For some, their deep sense of belonging comes from being a part of a community. They want to connect with others who are also articulating a sense of self. Some young adults desire emotional support and guidance. Some want their religious group to be a place where they can develop their professional and support networks. Many single young adults participate in congregations in the hope of meeting a life partner.

Many young adults want to learn about increasing their practice of tradition and rituals. Some seek to deepen their relationship with God.

Some approach religion through the intellectual study of modern socio-historical texts or the religious canon. Others value the opportunity to effect social change with a group of people who share their values. Still other young adults seek a space for creative religious expression through music, art, writing, or dance.

**Practices: What do congregations do?**

- Congregations offer learning opportunities directed specifically to young adults.
- Congregations organize affinity groups so that the young adults can find like-minded peers.
- Congregations offer opportunities where young adults can sometimes engage as participants, and other times take on the responsibilities of leading.
- Congregations offer multiple points of entry: social, educational, spiritual, cultural, emotional, and theological.

**Best Practice 4. Congregations take young adults' differing commitments to religious observance and levels of religious education into account.**

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**Research Finding: Young adults thrive when they are "met where they are."**

Young adults do not want to be judged for their level of religious practice or knowledge, nor feel ashamed by their lack of knowledge or practice. They want to approach religious practice focused on meaning and intention. While respecting the religious standards of the congregation and their religion at large, many took pride in making their own choices based on personal factors such as level of knowledge, peer group, and religious upbringing.

**Best Practice 5. Congregations engage young adults emotionally and interactively in both peer- and clergy-led worship services.**

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**Research Finding: Young adults welcome opportunities to feel emotionally affected.**

Young adults want to feel moved by music, a connection to their history, a sense of cultural heritage, and nostalgia. They want to be emotionally

engaged and feel like a participant, not an audience member, at worship services.

### Practices: What do congregations do?

Religious leaders cultivate an atmosphere during worship services that enables young adults to be participants instead of audience members.

**Best Practice 6. Congregations provide an environment that encourages questioning and provides learning opportunities for young adults who are seeking religious relevance in their daily lives.**

**Best Practice 7. Congregations encourage young adults to think critically and analytically about religious tradition and to articulate similarities and differences among traditions, so that they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith tradition.**

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**Research Finding: Young adults respond to a theoretical and practical balance between the particular and the universal.**

Every individual interviewed acknowledged that there are many ways to believe in God and to live a religious life. Young adults appreciate an acknowledgement of the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. They do not want to feel cloistered from the outside world. Instead, they want to be able to share their spiritual interests with peers of different faiths. Through the articulation of similarities and differences, they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith.

### Practices: What do congregations do?

- Congregations create balance between the particular and the universal by focusing on the thoughtful transmission of the theology and tradition of the particular congregation, not on theological debates (especially those that

disparage other religious traditions or denominations).

- Congregations create balance between the particular and the universal by creating an atmosphere that is self-consciously open and analytical, acknowledging the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Congregations create balance between the particular and the universal by facilitating interfaith and interdenominational exchange.

**Best Practice 8. Congregational leaders are accessible and engaging, serve as role models for young adults, provide personal and religious guidance to young adults, and show genuine interest in young adults as individuals.**

## Strategies for Young Adult Faith Formation

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The following strategies flow from the research and eight best practices, and can serve as guide for developing, expanding, and/or enriching faith formation with young adults. They are illustrative and descriptive of the possibilities for faith formation with young adults, and are offered to stimulate your congregation's vision and practice.

For many congregations the thought of incorporating the best practices and strategies for young adult ministry into a faith formation program may be overwhelming. In this regard it is important to recognize that many congregations partner with neighboring churches to plan and implement programs that no one church could undertake alone. In fact, one of the first steps in developing effective faith formation for young adults may be to find partners to collaborate with: to begin planning together, promoting each other's programs, and implementing joint programs to serve all of the young adults in the area.

## 1. Integrate young adults fully into the ministries and leadership roles of the congregation.

One strategy that every congregation can undertake is to invite young adults into ministry and leadership positions in the congregation, and provide the appropriate formation and training necessary for these roles. It is essential that the invitation is *personal* and matches the interests and talents of young adults with ministry/leadership opportunities. Begin by developing an inventory of possibilities, then a strategy for invitation and involvement. Consider all of the church's ministries—liturgy, education, justice and service/outreach, and so on—as well as the variety of groups, such as support groups, small faith sharing groups, and enrichment groups (marriage, family). In addition to congregational leadership roles, young adults should be encouraged to take on leadership roles in young adult groups and programs.

Make sure that before any involvement with ministry or leadership, there is an opportunity for formation and training. This can provide a study-action model to prepare young adults for their particular ministry or leadership role through study (e.g., workshops, courses, or small group learning) accompanied by actual involvement in their ministry or leadership role. This type of learning involves a continuous cycle of study-action-study-action, as the young adults' involvement in action generates new needs for learning.

## 2. Offer opportunities specifically designed for young adults to study the Bible and Christian tradition, then apply it to life in an environment that promotes relationship building and encourages questioning.

To reach the diversity of young adults and their learning needs, congregations can offer a variety of learning models, including independent learning, small group learning, and large group learning. (For three additional learning models, see the descriptions of milestone faith formation, spiritual formation, and service/study-action.)

- **Independent Learning.** Independent learning provides maximum flexibility for the learner: when to learn, how to learn, where to learn, and what to learn. With the increasing

number and variety of audio and video podcasts and online learning courses and resources, independent learning offers a 24/7 approach to religious education for busy young adults. Congregations can serve as guide to helping adults find the best learning format and content to address their learning needs. Examples of independent learning include:

1. Reading (such as a book-of-the-month club)
2. Magazines (print or online)
3. Podcasts/audio learning (delivered via a congregation's web site or other reputable site)
  - audio presentations from conferences, workshops, or a speaker series
  - Sunday sermons
  - audiobooks on tape/CD or at iTunes
  - studying the Bible on CD (e.g., *The Bible Experience* from Zondervan)
  - podcasts on iTunes and religious web sites
  - iTunes University: audio presentations of university courses
4. Video podcasts and video-based learning
  - feature films and documentaries
  - iTunes University: video presentations of university courses
5. Online courses
  - online courses (e.g., C21 Online at Boston College: [www.bc.edu/sites/c21online](http://www.bc.edu/sites/c21online); STEP Online Theology at University of Notre Dame: <http://step.nd.edu>)
  - e-courses (e.g., spirituality courses at [www.spiritualityandpractice.com](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com))
6. Online learning centers
  - religious resource websites with articles, practices, activities, etc. (a great example of a religious web site focused on young adults is [www.BustedHalo.com](http://www.BustedHalo.com)).

- **Small Group Learning.** Probably the most popular young adult learning process, small group learning formats provide an excellent way to address the diversity of young adult learning needs by organizing a variety of small groups with each one targeted to a particular learning need or topic. Small group learning formats also provide lots of flexibility in schedule and location. Groups can meet at times and places that best fit their lives, such as weekly breakfast at a

local restaurant or for coffee at a local Starbucks. Small groups create an accepting environment in which new relationships can be formed.

It is not always necessary for the congregation to sponsor small group programs. Congregational leaders can provide resources, support, and training for leaders, thereby enabling adults to organize their own small groups. Small group learning can take many different forms, including:

1. Discipleship or faith sharing groups or study groups (utilizing print, audio, video, and/or online resources)
  - Bible study groups
  - theological formation study groups
  - theme or issue-oriented study groups
  - Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing groups
  - book study club
2. Practice-focused groups
  - prayer
  - service/faith in action
  - parenting
3. Special interest groups
  - support groups (e.g., single women, newly married couples, cancer survivors)
4. Ministry groups
  - groups engaged in leadership and ministry within the congregation or to the community of which study is a part of their work

Small “missional communities,” formed in neighborhoods and apartment complexes, are at the heart of Axis, which is the name of Willowcreek Community Church’s young adult ministry. These groups seek to build community by bringing God’s love, compassion, justice, and service to the world around them. Here, young adults connect with one another and delve deeper into the concept of community at weekly table experiences, where they share a meal with their neighbors, study Scripture, and pray together. Axis groups are also involved in regular service to those in need. Small groups connect monthly at the Axis Experience, worshipping God within community through their own unique expression, especially through the arts. The Axis community sits together at Saturday evening worship and usually hangs out afterwards for a movie, dinner, etc.

The “God Talk” Book Club (Basilica of Saint Mary, Minneapolis) offers an opportunity for learning and discussion about theology and life in a context that is always mindful of who God is. This group allows young adults to engage in dialogue about the topics of the day while asking the question: “Does this reflect our theology of God?” Young adults explore a variety of themes related to their understanding of God and their relationship with God, and the implications of that relationship in their larger life experience. While participants are encouraged to read the books, all are invited to come share some wine and conversation while discussing their thoughts about God and life today.

- **Large Group Learning.** Large group learning formats provide a way to serve a large number of adults around learning needs and topics that appeal to a wide audience. Large group learning programs can be offered jointly with other churches. Here is a sampling of large group learning formats:
1. Multi-session programs (e.g., offering multi-week courses on theological themes, books of the Bible, youth adult life issues)
  2. One-session program (e.g., offering a monthly session on theological or spiritual formation)
  3. Speaker series (e.g., offering multi-evening or multi-week program focused around a particular theological themes, Christian practices, young adult life issues, or current events)
  4. Round table discussions after Sunday worship (e.g., exploring the Sunday Scripture readings in age groups or intergenerational groups with refreshments)
  5. Workshops (e.g., offering one day programs targeted to specific life issues, such as relationships, work, career, transitions)
  6. Film festivals (e.g., exploring key themes in movies, such as relationships, social issues, and meaning in life, with a Christian perspective)
  7. Conferences (e.g., participating in regional church-sponsored conferences)

Theology on Tap is one of the most popular young adult faith formation programs in the Catholic Church today. Begun in Chicago and now offered through the country, Theology on Tap is a four-week summer



program for young adults—women and men in their 20s and 30s, married or single. It features a speaker and open discussion, and is usually held in an outside venue such as a restaurant or club. The purpose of Theology on Tap is threefold:

- to find and invite young adults to gather with their peers for a great experience of Catholicism (evangelization)
- to share the rich traditions of our faith with this generation (catechesis)
- to create a forum for young adults to address and discuss their issues, questions, and concerns (faith formation, spiritual growth, and community building)

For more information about Theology on Tap, go to: [www.yamchicago.org](http://www.yamchicago.org) or RENEW International: [www.renewintl.org](http://www.renewintl.org).

Sunday Night Live at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis strives to nourish Catholics in their 20s and 30s by inviting them to seek a meaningful connection with a spiritual community of peers. Monthly gatherings are held after the 6:30 p.m. Sunday Mass and explore in a discussion format various issues regarding faith and everyday life, such as “Materialism and God,” “Making the Invisible Visible: Sacramental Exploration,” “Separated at Birth: A Deeper Look into Islam,” and “This Ain’t No Garden of Eden: Environmental Issues.”

### 3. Develop faith formation around young adult milestones and life transitions.

Marriage, baptism, moments of sickness (personal, family, friends), the death of a loved one, and life decisions are all important milestones or life transitions that provide an excellent opportunity for young adult faith formation. Very often these are “moments of return” when young adults who have not been involved in church life for a while return to the church for a ritual experience, family celebration, religious perspective on life’s transitions, encouragement, and/or comfort and support. This is a great opportunity to nurture the faith of young adults *and* welcome them back into the life of the faith community.

Congregations would do well to carefully plan: 1. the preparation for marking a milestone, 2. the experience of the milestone, and 3. follow-up after

the milestone. A milestones plan includes congregational activities and individual/home activities. For example, developing a milestones plan for marriage could include the following elements:

1. Education: marriage course or workshop (theology, life skills, faith practices)
2. Ritual: preparation for the marriage ritual
3. Connection to the community: prayers at Sunday worship for the married couple (before and after the ceremony); a “Book of Blessings” from the congregation to the married couple with prayers and words of support and encouragement
4. Continued support: monthly married couples small group meeting; online resources for married couples at the parish web site, a free magazine subscription for the first year of marriage, monthly e-newsletter for married couples
5. Reunion: a reunion breakfast or dinner for newly married couples every six months for the first several years of marriage
6. Anniversary: celebrating marriage anniversaries each month at Sunday worship with a special remembrance and blessing; sending a note of congratulations and a prayer on the anniversary of marriage
7. Resources: Bible readings and reflections for married couples, prayers for a new couple, suggestions for starting a faith-filled home life, ways to be involved in the faith community, ways to be involved in service and justice ministries as a couple

For an example of baptism milestones faith formation plan see “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation” in this issue.

### 4. Provide a variety of retreat and spiritual formation experiences.

Retreats and/or spiritual formation programs are specialized programs that nurture the spiritual life of young adults. While spiritual formation can utilize individualized, small group, or large group learning models, there are several formats that are particular to spiritual formation, for example:

1. Online spiritual formation ([www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie), [www.taize.fr](http://www.taize.fr), [www.upperroom.org](http://www.upperroom.org))
2. Mentoring with a spiritual director
3. Prayer group
4. Prayer breakfast
5. Church-based retreats: evenings, one-day, weekend

6. Advent and Lent retreat experiences
7. Retreat programs at local retreat houses.

Retreats are certainly one of the most popular and important formats for faith formation of young adults. Many congregations have weekend retreats for young adults once or twice a year as an integral element of their ministry with young adults. Retreat topics can address a wide range of young adult concerns and issues. Here are three descriptions of retreat programs:

*Life in the Balance*

(Marble Collegiate Church, New York City)  
Do you work too much? Do you eat enough vegetables? How much time do you spend watching TV on the couch compared to praying and expanding your spiritual life? Our annual retreat will be a time to explore how we prioritize our lives and investigate the choices we make. We're going to dedicate time to helping balance every part of our being—mind, body, and soul—through directed activities and discussions.

*Prayer in Daily Life Retreat*

Many find it difficult to go away for a few days. Taking place amid one's daily activities, this retreat offers participants the chance to reflect, pray, and converse with a spiritual director. The directed prayer experience begins on a Sunday afternoon or evening with a gathering of all the participants. Then, during the week, everyone commits to pray for one half-hour daily (guidance provided!) and to meet with a director for one half-hour daily to talk about this experience of prayer. All the participants gather again on Friday evening to conclude the retreat.

*Come to the Quiet Retreat*

(Charis Ministries, Chicago)  
The Charis silent, individually-directed weekend retreat is for young adults, married or single, seeking to deepen their relationship with God. Young adults meet each other on Friday evening before spending much of Saturday into Sunday in silent reflection. Young adults spend time one-on-one with a spiritual director to listen to where God's Spirit is moving in their prayer and in their life. As a group, they explore new ways to pray in the Ignatian tradition. Solitary and contemplative prayer time includes journaling, reading, scripture, walking the

grounds, art, music, listening to your own thoughts and resting in your private room.

Spiritual formation is also available online. Websites like the Irish Jesuit's [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie) provides a quick ten-minute guided meditation based on the Ignatian *Examen* that young adults can do online. BustedHalo.com gives young adults one new article a day and speaks about merging everyday experience with an experience of spirituality.

## 5. Engage young adults in short-term and long-term social justice and service projects, locally, nationally and globally.

Social justice and service are essential, and very often life transforming, features of young adult faith and spirituality. Justice is an essential element of the Christian tradition that even the least religiously active young adult approves of. Success stories about young adults merging their faith with social action are found in all Christian churches.

Congregations can provide opportunities for young adults to serve others, whether with other young adults or with the whole congregation, as well engaging young adults locally, nationally, and internationally. Many organizations and churches sponsor immersion or extended action projects for young adults, either nationally or internationally. In every young adult service project, it is important to combine service and action with an understanding of social justice so that young adults see the structural dimensions of social issues.

- **Works of service: responding to people in need.** Begin by surveying your community to find local service opportunities, and by identifying places where young adults are already involved. Work with local agencies involved with feeding people, housing people, collecting food and clothing, visiting prisoners, tutoring children, etc. Identify national and international opportunities for service, such as building homes with Habitat for Humanity.
- **Works of justice: addressing the root causes of social problems.** Justice focuses on the rights of individuals, families, and all creation. It engages young adults in analyzing social situations or social structures, working for long-term social change, and addressing the underlying social

causes of individual problems. Working for justice includes writing letters to key people about important social issues and legislation, working with groups to change legislation or budget priorities, and supporting organizations that work for justice. Identify organizations that you can partner with to address justice issues, such as Bread for the World (hunger), the Children's Defense Fund (children's issues), and the ONE Campaign (poverty).

## 6. Develop an online presence.

The Internet is often the first place that young adults look for anything today. Those ministries that have a presence on the Internet not only have the distinct advantage of being more present to young adults who are anonymously searching for a spiritual message or home, but also have the advantage of providing solid informational sound bytes to feed this generation's need for quick information. To establish an online presence, congregations would be wise to engage young adults in developing and maintaining a web site.

- **Internet ministry.** Simply put, if you do not have a parish website, you do not exist in the minds of young adults. What would it be like if a congregation invested time and energy in developing and maintaining its own web site as a center for young adults? A church web site and e-mail can:
  - Post worship times and a listing of events
  - List the faith formation programs and opportunities both in the congregation and in other churches
  - Provide online small groups, courses, and reading groups (e.g., a book-of-the-month club)
  - Link young adults to faith formation offerings on other web sites, such as online courses
  - Deliver timely faith formation resources for young adults on a wide variety of topics and interests that can be targeted to the diversity of the young adult population
  - Provide social networking among other young adults who are taking courses or participating in small group learning
  - Deliver a daily Bible study to every young adult via the web or e-mail
  - Provide audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers, and link to

other sources such as iTunes (and iTunes University)

- Answer questions by providing a place on the web site for people to ask anonymous questions and have theological experts answer them (see the BustedHalo.com "Question Box" for an example.).

Every church can start a simple blog, which can be developed in the course of 15 minutes, that certainly can suffice as a simple parish web page (Blogger or Wordpress are two favorite software packages). On the front page of your site put the address and worship times of your church and at least the pastor's name, along with a picture of the church in some form.

A church web site will not replace face-to-face faith formation, but it can certainly enhance and expand what congregations are doing and provide new approaches for delivering faith formation to involved and not-yet-involved young adults.

- **Podcasting.** The iPod has become a must-have gadget for all young adults, and now they can listen to you on it if you produce a podcast, which is a short-form radio show that is released on the Internet to subscribers. Podcasts are relatively simple to produce and are fairly low budget items as well, unless you want bells and whistles. Fr. Dave Dwyer wrote an easy to read guide to producing a podcast: find it on [www.bustedhalo.com/features/HowToPodcast.htm](http://www.bustedhalo.com/features/HowToPodcast.htm). One church streamed their Sunday worship live for about a month. In doing so they found that many young adults first viewed the service online, then decided that the church was so vibrant and expressive that they wanted to come and experience the worship service in person.

## Conclusion

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The research that we have examined has pointed to at least three imperatives for young adult faith formation in congregations:

1. Successful religious programming for young adults offers community and spirituality in the context of a clearly defined faith tradition.
2. Successful religious programming responds to young adults' felt needs for empowerment, leadership opportunities, responsibility, and

accountability, as well as authenticity and accessibility.

3. A lack of specificity does not facilitate pluralism and understanding for people of other faiths. Individuals who know who they are and what they believe are able to honestly encounter differences and explore areas of mutuality.

The challenges of young adult faith formation are daunting, but the future depends on how we respond today.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Congregations that Get It* study by Tobin Belzer, Richard W. Flory, Nadia Roumani, and Brie Loskota explores the experiences and attitudes of young adults who are actively participating in congregational life. Fifteen congregations were studied from the Jewish, Christian (Protestant and Catholic), and Muslim traditions. To analyze the intergenerational transmission of faith, the researchers analyzed individuals within an institutional context and the institutions themselves. The research team visited congregations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington, DC. The team spent several weeks collecting data at each congregation. They conducted approximately 100 interviews with congregational leaders, lay leaders, and young adults in fifteen congregations. (The research project was based at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, in connection with Hebrew Union College, the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, and the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation. It was generously supported by the Lilly Endowment.)

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### Web Sites for Resources

- [www.bustedalo.com](http://www.bustedalo.com) – BustedHalo.com is an online magazine for spiritual seekers in their 20s and 30s.
- [www.ncyama.org](http://www.ncyama.org) – the web site for the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Associate with a section on examples of best practices in young adult ministry. (See the "young adult ministry" section.)
- [www.elca.org/youngadults](http://www.elca.org/youngadults) – the web site for the ELCA young adult ministry with a variety of resources and program ideas.
- [www.gbod.org/ministries/youngadults](http://www.gbod.org/ministries/youngadults) – the web site for the United Methodist Church young adult ministry with articles, resources, and program ideas.
- <http://youngadults.ag.org> – the web site for the Assemblies of God young adult ministries with resources, podcasts, articles, program ideas, and a newsletter
- [www.pcusa.org/youngadult](http://www.pcusa.org/youngadult) – the web site for the Presbyterian Church USA young adult ministry with articles and resources
- [www.episcopalchurch.org/49662\\_48944\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm?menupage=50539](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/49662_48944_ENG_HTM.htm?menupage=50539) – the web site for the Episcopal Church young adult ministry with resources and articles.
- [www.generationaxis.com](http://www.generationaxis.com) – the web site for Willow Creek Community Church ministry with young adults

## Practice Ideas

# Planning for Young Adult Faith Formation

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*Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, “Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation,” to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with young adults in your congregation.*

## Young Adults & the Congregation

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**Best Practice 1.** Congregations recognize that young adults make an important contribution to congregational life.

**Best Practice 8.** Congregational leaders are accessible and engaging, serve as role models for young adults, provide personal and religious guidance to young adults, and show genuine interest in young adults as individuals.

- How does your congregations recognize the importance of young adults?
  - Facilitate regular intergenerational communication between young adults and church leadership
  - Provide space in the church for young adult programs
  - Designate funding for young adult ministry
  - Have a staff person with responsibility to coordinate young adult programming
  - Show appreciation for young lay leaders
- What are one or two new initiatives that your church can develop to more recognize the importance of young adults in congregational life?

## Young Adults & Leadership

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**Best Practice 2.** Congregations engender a sense of ownership by enabling young adult congregants to create and plan their own events, and by making leadership positions—both within their peer group and within the larger congregation—available to young adults.

- How does your congregation currently integrate young adults into the ministries and leadership roles of the congregation? Identify the leadership roles and committees that young adults are currently involved in.
- How does your congregation engage young adults in leadership roles in young adult groups and programs?
- How can your congregation invite young adults into ministry and leadership positions in the congregation and young adult ministry, and provide the appropriate formation and training necessary for these roles?
- What are one or two new initiatives that your church can develop to more fully involve youth adults in congregational and young adult ministry leadership?

## Young Adults & Worship

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**Best Practice 5.** Congregations engage young adults emotionally and interactively in both peer- and clergy-led worship services.

- How does Sunday worship emotionally engage young adults? Identify specific ways that Sunday worship connects with young adults on an emotional level.
- What does your congregation do to engage and involve young adults in Sunday worship as active participants?
- What are one or two new ways that your congregation can enhance young adult’s experience of and participation in Sunday worship?

## Young Adults & Learning

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Best Practice 3. Congregations offer multiple points of entry and numerous arenas for young adults to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.

Best Practice 4. Congregations take young adults' differing commitments to religious observance and levels of religious education into account.

Best Practice 6. Congregations provide an environment that encourages questioning and provides learning opportunities for young adults who are seeking religious relevance in their daily lives.

Best Practice 7. Congregations encourage young adults to think critically and analytically about religious tradition and to articulate similarities and differences among traditions, so that they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith tradition.

- How does your congregation currently engage young adults in exploring/studying the Bible, theology, and Christian tradition? Identify specific programs, activities, and/or settings in which learning is offered.
- What types of learning opportunities does your congregation offer for young adults to learn with their peers?
- Does your congregation offer young adults the opportunity to share their spiritual interests with peers of different faiths? Identify the programs, activities, and/or settings where young adults across religious traditions gather for learning and sharing.
- Which of the following learning models is your congregation currently using in young adult faith formation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your current models?

- Independent Learning Opportunities** (e.g., reading, podcasts and audio learning, video podcasts and video-based learning, online courses, online learning centers)
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- Small Group Learning Opportunities** (e.g., discipleship or faith sharing groups, Bible study groups, topical study groups, practice-focused groups, special interest groups, ministry groups)
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- Large Group Learning Opportunities** (e.g., multi-session courses, one-session program, speaker series, round table discussions, workshops, film festivals, conferences)
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- What new opportunities for young adult learning can your congregation introduce to engage more young adults in religious learning?

## Young Adults & Milestones

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- Does your congregation provide faith formation around young adult milestones and life transitions (e.g., marriage, baptism, moments of sickness, the death of a loved one, life decisions)? Which milestones?
- Does your congregational plan for each milestone include: 1. the preparation for marking a milestone, 2. the experience of the milestone, and 3. follow-up after the milestone? What's included? What's missing?
- What are one or two new milestones that your congregation can build young adult faith formation around?

## Young Adults & Spiritual Formation

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- What types of retreats and spiritual formation experiences does your congregation currently offer young adults?
- How can your congregation strengthen the spiritual formation opportunities for young adults? What are one or two new retreat or spiritual formation experiences that your congregation can offer young adults?

## Young Adults & Service

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- What types of short-term and long-term social justice and service projects (locally, nationally and globally) does your congregation currently offer young adults (sponsored by the church or offered by other organizations)?
- How does your congregation prepare young adults for justice and service involvements, and help them to reflect upon their experience in light of the Christian faith?
- How can your congregation strengthen or expand justice and service involvement opportunities for young adults? What are one or two new projects—locally, nationally, or globally—that your congregation can organize or adopt to engage young adults in action?

## Young Adults & the Web

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- Does your church have a web site with a special section targeted to young adults?
- Does your church web site provide podcasts directed at young adults (e.g., Sunday worship service, sermons, and presentations by guest speakers)?
- Does your congregation utilize e-mail to communicate and stay in-touch with young adults? Does your congregation send an e-newsletter to young adults?

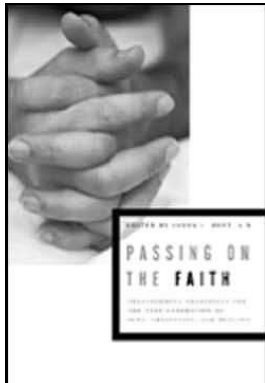
- What features does your congregation incorporate on the web site? For example:
  - worship times and a listing of events
  - congregational faith formation programs for young adults and online learning courses and activities
  - online small groups, courses, and reading groups (e.g., a book-of-the-month club)
  - formation resources for young adults on a wide variety of topics and interests
  - social networking among other young adults who are taking courses or participating in small group learning
  - daily Bible study (on the web or e-mailed to young adults)
  - audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers, and link to other sources such as iTunes (and iTunes University)
  - question and answer box

## Action Strategies

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# Best Practice Resources

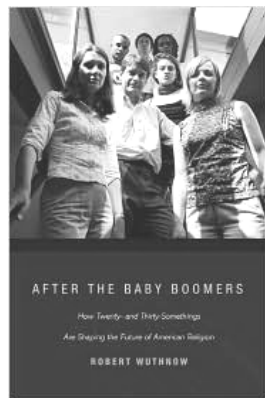
## Young Adult Faith Formation



### Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims

Edited by James Heft, S.M. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) [\$22]

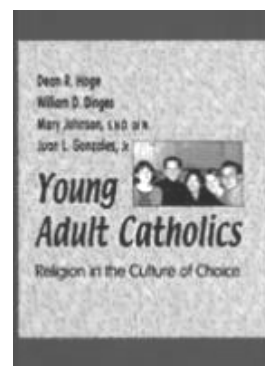
*Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* is an important new book that is the result of a 2004 international conference at USC, “Faith, Fear and Indifference: Constructing the Religious Identity of the Next Generation.” The book includes original essays by international scholars that explore the challenges of passing on faith today, summary reports on three recent national studies of youth and young adults, and direction for passing on faith to the next generations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The report on new research on young adults conducted at USC, “Congregations that Get It,” is especially helpful.



### After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion

Robert Wuthnow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) [\$29.95]

Robert Wuthnow has produced an essential and important resource for understanding the lifestyles and beliefs of young adults and the impact they are having on religion. Wuthnow interprets new evidence from scores of in-depth interviews and surveys to answer the questions: What are their churchgoing habits and spiritual interests and needs? How does their faith affect their families, their communities, and their politics? Wuthnow devotes chapters to examining seven key trends in the world of young adults, who participates in congregations, recent trends in religious beliefs, spirituality and spiritual practices, faith and family, religion and public life, ethnic diversity, religious uses of the internet, and vital congregations. This book is filled with information, analysis, and implications that can shape the church’s ministry with young adults for years to come.

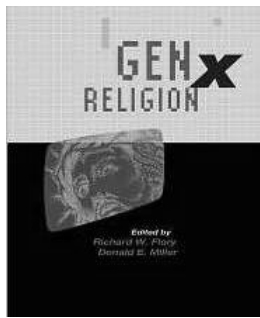


### Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice

Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, S.N.D. de N., and Juan L. Gonzales, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) [\$19]

Based on a 1997 national survey of Catholic young adults and supplemented by interviews with 800 young adults, this book presents a profile of the religious attitudes, beliefs, and needs of the current generation of Catholics in their 20s and 30s. The authors underscore observations that include the strength and tenacity of Catholic identity in spite of many challenges, the high level of personal decision-making among young adults, and the readiness of young adult Catholics for institutional reforms. The conclusion describes five problematic issues facing the Catholic church and provides recommendations to church leaders from young adults and the research team.

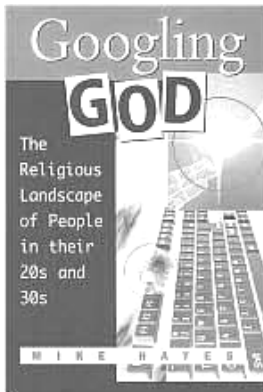




## GenX Religion

Edited by Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller (New York: Routledge, 2000) [\$29.95]

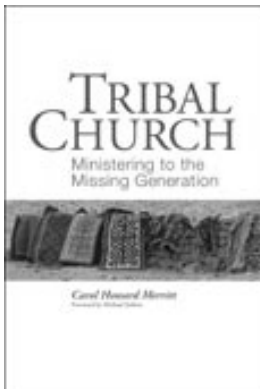
*GenX Religion* is an ethnographic study of 14 congregations engaged in ministry with Generation X young adults. Each chapter presents a case study of the congregation's particular approach to young adults. The introductory chapter by Donald Miller provides an overview of Generation X values, politics, and religious commitments; and the concluding chapter by Richard Flory provides an analysis of the characteristics of Generation X religion based on the 14 case studies and includes recommendations for religious leaders.



## Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s

Mike Hayes (New York: Paulist Press, 2007) [\$17.95]

Mike Hayes, the managing editor of BustedHalo.com and associate director of Paulist Young Adult Ministries, has a new book on ministering to the two generations of young adults today—Generation X and the Millennials. Part 1 of the book examines who are young adults and what is working well in young adult ministry. Part 2 uses twelve interviews to identify the characteristics of Generation X young adults and Millennial young adults. Part 3 provides practical strategies for addressing the needs of young adults and developing a young adult ministry.



## Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation

Carol Howard Merritt (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007) [\$17]

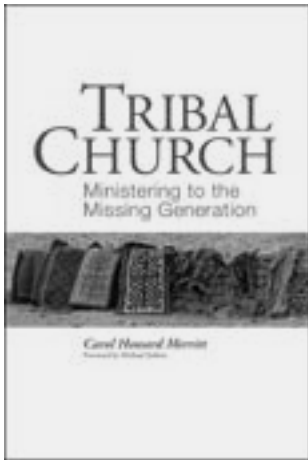
Carol Howard Merritt, a pastor in her mid-thirties, has written a wonderful book that approaches young adults from the perspective of their inclusion in an intergenerational congregation. She describes the financial, social, and familial situations that affect many young adults today, and how churches can provide a safe, supportive place for young adults to nurture relationships and foster spiritual growth. There are few places left in society that allow for real intergenerational connections to be made, yet these connections are vital for any church that seeks to reflect the fullness of the body of Christ. Using the metaphor of a tribe to describe the close bonds that form when people of all ages decide to walk together on their spiritual journeys, Merritt casts a vision of the church that embraces the gifts of all members while reaching out to those who might otherwise feel unwelcome or unneeded. By breaking down artificial age barriers and building up intentional relationships, congregations can provide a space for all people to connect with God, each other, and the world.



## The Basic Guide to Young Adult Ministry

John C. Cusick and Katherine F. DeVries (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2001) [\$25]

*The Basic Guide to Young Adult Ministry* offers a practical, pastoral approach for inviting young adults in the 20s and 30s into greater participation in the life of the church. Part One looks at who young adults are, their affiliation with the church, what they seek, and why a ministry directed specifically to them makes sense. Part Two presents information about effective young adult ministry at the local church level. Part Three discusses young adult ministry beyond the local church—as an areawide outreach among several churches and as a regional or citywide outreach.



## New Book Excerpt

# Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation

Carol Howard Merritt  
(Alban Institute, 2007)

*Carol Howard Merritt is a pastor at Western Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. You can read her blog at [www.tribalchurch.org](http://www.tribalchurch.org). This article was adapted from her new book, Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation, copyright © 2007 by the Alban Institute. All rights reserved.*

In my bedroom, I have a Gabbeh rug, woven in deep browns and greens. Not the typical elegant Persian rug, this one has thick choppy wool, rough edges, and crooked lines. Made with vegetable dyes, each row changes colors, leaving a wonderful earthy richness. In a region known for its fine and intricate carpets, these rugs are bottom of the line because they are constructed and carried by nomadic tribes who pack them on animals until they set down a temporary home, then unfold them onto the ground, where their family can gather on that four by six-foot area.

While preparing to put our house on the market before our move from Rhode Island to Washington, D.C., I realized I needed a carpet to cover the shiny wood flooring my husband and I had recently installed. I also imagined it would be comforting to have a bit of familiar space to unpack upon reaching a strange land. So as I got ready to move for the seventh time in sixteen years, I bought the carpet and packed it into the trunk of my car. I needed a familiar space that I could take with me, something that was sturdy, warm, and not likely to wear out anytime soon.

I don't travel with a caravan of extended family and friends, but like many in my generation of thirty-somethings, I move often with my spouse and daughter, increasingly away from my family of origin. When I unpacked my boxes in Arlington, Virginia, I rolled out the rug in my bedroom. My daughter and I sat down on the thick pile as we listened to books on tape and admired the brown and green diamond shapes. The soft itchiness tickled my hands, connecting me to my history in Rhode Island, as well as its own years of tradition tightly wound up into its threads.

## Urban Tribes

The carpet reminds me that each place I find myself, I try to quickly set up a little area where I can meet friends and gather a makeshift family. Evidently, even though I feel dreadfully alone sometimes, I'm not alone. Ethan Watters wrote an article about meeting his young unmarried friends every Tuesday night at a particular restaurant and labeled them an "urban tribe." From the outpouring of mail the little piece received, he realized that the sociological trend was widespread, so he wrote a book on this development.

The term "urban tribe" strikes a chord with me too, although I'm married and have a child. Away from my family of origin, I long for community. As a pastor, I see that the best work of our church springs up when these groups begin to form: small, cohesive parties who can depend on each other for interesting friendships, pet sitting, and meaningful holidays.

## Forming Tribal Churches

When I began as a twenty-seven-year-old pastor of a small rural church, ministering to young adults seemed like an impossible task, especially when I looked at newspapers, philosophy, and church growth trends. Newspapers and magazines often dressed young adults up as greedy slackers, ever-sponging off our parents and never assuming responsible roles in society.

I often did not recognize the people our popular culture described. No matter what cause united moms, how much volunteering dads engaged in, or what trends twenty-year-olds began, they were inevitably compared disparagingly to Baby Boomers, the civil rights movements of the sixties, and were eternally dwarfed in that Boomer-looming shadow. How could the church understand

young adults if it continually looked at them through the tinted spectacles of older adults?

Then I read church growth material, which thoughtfully categorized younger generations. I loved studying books like *Soul Tsunami*, but when I tried to put some ideas into practice in my elderly congregation (like the instructions to “get glocal”), I realized the great gulf between where we were as a church and where we needed to be to implement the suggested ideas. I began swimming and swirling, feeling hopeless, like I had to reinvent two thousand years of solid traditions and practice to reach out to my generation.

Visiting contemporary worship services particularly designed for young adults made me feel irritated and empty. I was a part of a large, growing segment of spiritual young adults who wanted nothing to do with contemporary worship. As soon as I saw that white screen slither down from the ceiling, I knew that I was going to have a difficult time stomaching the next twenty-five minutes. Someone was trying too hard to be hip. Like my high school English teacher’s attempts to be fashionable and cool, it just seemed *wrong*.

I was being unfair. Actually I think that I was just jealous. Obviously, there was a place in our society for slick worship, but I was like most pastors. I could never be hip, even when I tried really, really hard. I could buy a pair of designer jeans to wear on a Sunday morning and use the word “awesome” a lot, but I was still perfectly square.

My rural church was far from cool too. It was small, ancient, and full of people over sixty—and the perfect place to effectively care for young adults. Like those nomadic tribes, our church needed a rug—a comforting space for young adults, a place where years of tradition formed something beautiful. And they came, and they began to join. Over time, we began to weave a rich tapestry of diverse, intergenerational people. We did not discover the formula for a booming Gen X megachurch in just three years; instead, we reversed the trend of lost membership, kept the original members, and had a consistent ten percent growth made up of individuals of various ages. Our congregation became an intergenerational meeting ground, a place for supportive tribes to form, and I began to realize that our mainline denominational church has great assets for reaching out to young adults. When I moved to Rhode Island, I noticed the same thing happened in that bayside New

England town of Barrington. Then I joined the staff of Western Presbyterian Church, an urban church in Washington, D.C., where the flow of young members seemed to rise every week.

## Weaving Connections

Though young adults came, we realized how easy it was for them not to. It’s no longer important for someone in their twenties or thirties to go to church. Denominational affiliation has very little power in our politics or workplaces. The societal expectation to attend worship is gone, the blue laws faded a long time ago, and now children have plenty of sporting and scouting opportunities during those once-sacred hours.

When a young person walks into a church, it’s a significant moment, because no one expects her to go and nothing pressures her to attend; instead, she enters the church looking for something. She searches for connection in her displacement: connection with God through spiritual practices, connection with her neighbors through an intergenerational community, and connection with the world through social justice outreach.

The church has been making these vital connections for thousands of years, and we can easily respond to the young, weary travelers in our midst, letting them know that they can find a spiritual home within our worshipping communities and that we will provide a supportive space for them so that they can form their tribe.

Our churches can weave a source of connection. I have seen tribes gather in a variety of settings: in a college town, the rural countryside, a New England community, and an urban setting. Watching relations and groups develop in a church, creating and maintaining space for them, is a vital part of what I do as a pastor.

Envisioning what the church will look like in the next twenty years, I imagine a body that gathers together to worship God, strives for social justice, and cultivates tribes. Even the smallest churches—*especially* the smallest churches—have the resources to respond to young adults in meaningful ways when they understand their contexts and make a place for them. These relationships take shape when our intergenerational groups of displaced families and single people begin to weave a rich tapestry of familiar space.