

Clay United Methodist Church

Justin Paul Farrell

University of Notre Dame

Introduction

Clay Church, a mainline Protestant congregation with traditional worship, orthodox theology, and a relatively isolated location in a small Midwestern city, would not be the first place to look for cutting-edge young adult ministry. But recently, and in a relatively short amount of time, Clay has challenged the trajectory of mainline Protestant decline by attracting and engaging 18-29 year-olds—a diverse and vibrant demographic that now makes up 15% of the church body. In this essay, I describe six strategies that have worked for Clay and may be useful for other mainline congregations who are also battling what at times seems like inevitable decline, both in their overall membership and more specifically in the number of emerging adults in the pews. Although these best practices grew out of a particular congregational context, they are meant to be practical methods for churches of all shapes and sizes that want to more successfully connect with emerging adult culture.

Brief History

Since its beginnings in 1966, Clay has grown steadily and now has an average attendance of about 800 people. In the late 1990s the congregation went through a difficult period, which led to the installation of current Senior Pastor Herb Buwalda. Through Pastor Herb's embrace of "new ideas and big visions," Clay was revitalized and continues to thrive under his leadership. For example, Pastor Herb appointed the first female pastor in Clay's history and also led the church through a successful building campaign beginning in 2003. Three years ago, however, Clay's emerging adult population was in decline, and the staff at Clay decided that they needed to devote individualized attention to this age group.

In 2008, Pastor Herb commissioned a small group of lay leaders and staff to put together a major report charting the future course of the congregation, with an emphasis on reaching and engaging young adults (18-30). After six months of discernment, this report (known as the Chloe Report), concluded that Clay needed to transform into an externally focused church if they were to “reach and include a young adult (18-30 yrs old) population with the gospel of Christ.” This decision was based on the realization that “young adults often perceive the church as being judgmental, legalistic, exclusive, and unkind.” The lay leaders and staff writing the Chloe Report felt that expanding external ministries would be one way to counteract exclusivity and judgment because service projects show the radically inclusive “love of Jesus.” In other words, the lay leaders and staff felt that young adults want the congregation to put its money and time where its mouth is. With this new focus as their starting point, Clay began to develop and implement innovative ways to reach emerging adults in South Bend.

Strategy I: Building a Ministry from the Ground Up

Clay did not establish an “Emerging Adult Ministry,” appoint a staff-member, and advertise various events in their bulletin and on their website. Rather, they built and continue to build an emerging adult ministry from the bottom up by focusing on the development of organic relationships. Pastor Herb, Associate Pastor Kim Bloom, and Director of Discipleship Jim Elrod all believe strongly that no amount of bells and whistles can compare to building a community of deep relationships. Furthermore, no amount of tactical marketing, whether online or in print, will attract emerging adults unless they are woven together in relational community. Newly promoted Associate Pastor Jim Elrod puts this strategy simply: “community is more important than marketing.”

Emerging adult ministry at Clay is less about the lights and production and more about connecting the emerging adult population with each other and with other emerging adults in South Bend. Clay’s leadership has come to recognize that while young people’s tastes are always changing, what never changes is their need for belonging and a desire to get involved in something bigger than

themselves. Several years ago, Clay began a contemporary worship service hoping to attract younger adults, but instead it appealed to “people who grew up listening to Neil Diamond,” as one of the pastors described them. One emerging adult told me somewhat sarcastically, “Don’t woo me with a bouncy house anymore.” It’s not about the bells and whistles, the style of music, or the advertising budget— it’s about relationships. Or, as one emerging adult put it, “we are insecure and are looking for community. It’s not about the music but is about the social interactions.” Clay recognizes this and understands that the vitality of their emerging adult ministry is only as strong as the relationships that mature both inside and outside the walls of the church.

What does Clay do to build these relationships? It serves as a kind of “incubator” for relationships by providing informal space for relationships to develop. For example, young adult gatherings are not hosted at the church but are organized to take place in people’s homes, on a bike ride, or out for lunch. For many of the emerging adults I interviewed, the simpler the church, the better. In this process of community building, Clay staff members play an indirect role by providing the spaces and opportunities for connections that draw young adults into the life of the congregation without pressuring them. This has worked in the case of Sara, a twenty-six year-old woman interviewed who was only interested in the social opportunities at Clay in the beginning: “I’m not super involved in the church, but I’ve gotten to know some of the other younger members of the church in more of a non-formal setting. You know, just meeting them, going out to coffee, going out to dinner, but nothing formal or nothing structured by the church.” After many months of building relationships, Sara attended a new member class, got involved in Clay service projects, and started attending Sunday morning services.

Strategy II: Obsessively Informal

Clay is changing age-old promotion methods (e.g., flyers or Sunday morning bulletins) for emerging adult events. In fact, their promotion strategy is not to promote publically at all, but to spread details through word of mouth. Pastor

Herb explained this strategy best: “If you make it official, they won’t come...but if you make it sound *informal*, all of them will come.” This approach proved successful in the winter of 2009 when Pastor Herb wanted to host an emerging adult gathering at his house. Instead of coming up with a creative title (e.g. “Party at the Pastor’s Pad!” or “Mingle with the Minister!”), and putting a line in the bulletin or a link on the website, Pastor Herb simply sent out an informal email. It began as follows: “Friends, LeeAnne and I would like to host a ‘gathering’—note: not a ‘meeting,’ not a ‘committee!’—of young adults at our home to get to know one another a bit more, build relationships, and begin to discuss doing ministry together.” When staff sit down to plan an event for emerging adults, they know that for it to be successful they need to draw on the base of relationships that they have fostered throughout the years. In this particular gathering, they drew on Clay’s base of young adult relationships by sending out personal email invitations rather than a formal announcement. Pastor Herb had a 100% response rate to this email, and every single emerging adult on the email list attended the party. Clay’s leadership understands that emerging adults shy away from events or programs that are too formal, but instead they want to “just hangout” or get involved in a project without feeling that it is an obligation.

Strategy III: A “Mission,” not a “Ministry”

Clay staff members see their work with emerging adults as a “mission” rather than a ministry. A typical church ministry, such as worship ministry or membership committee, requires a regular time commitment and lots of meetings. But Clay’s pastors understand that emerging adults have hectic schedules, are averse to commitment, and live nomadic lifestyles. These characteristics make it difficult for emerging adults to get involved on a regular basis in traditional church ministries. Instead of beating their head against the wall trying to force emerging adults to get involved, Clay staff view their work with this age group as a long-term investment in the future life of the Christian Church. They expect little from emerging adults by way of participation, money,

or commitment—but they hope that their “mission” will yield results down the road when these emerging adults enter their thirties and forties.

Similarly, Clay always welcomes back, with no questions asked, emerging adults who miss Sunday services, or lapse in their contact with the church. Emerging adults who perceive church as a place of judgment, guilt, and exclusivity are pleasantly surprised that they are always welcomed back without being judged or made to feel guilty. This sentiment starts at the top with Pastor Herb, who constantly emphasizes the Wesleyan theology of inclusivity. Approaching emerging adult “mission” work from this angle eases the pressures and frustrations that too often plague emerging adult “ministry” because the expectations are radically different from a traditional ministry. Clay’s pastors do not expect to make committed church members and leaders out of emerging adults right away; rather, they hope that through their long-term investment in emerging adults they can be the hands and feet of Christ for an age group who is more skeptical toward institutional religion but still need someone to walk with them on their own journey of faith.

Strategy IV: Providing Service Activities

Emerging adults want to get involved in meaningful action to help others. They want to put their faith into action. In the 2008 Chloe Report, the church decided to emphasize external ministries, largely because they knew that this would provide a unique space for emerging adults to be active in church life. Some of the concrete ways emerging adults can get their hands dirty include the food pantry, building wells in Africa, Haiti relief, Habitat for Humanity in South Bend, and tutoring opportunities in local elementary schools. An emerging adult I interviewed said of his contemporaries, “emerging adults want to make a difference...they want to matter.” Another said that young people want to be “doers.” She calls it “sweat equity.” An older gentleman in the congregation believes the church should harness their eagerness to get their hands dirty in volunteer work. He says “churches should have them *do* something. Don’t have them sit around and talk (like older adults) but provide projects for them to get

involved in—like building something, drilling a well, traveling, etc. Take advantage of their time, energy, when they are relatively free.” Or, as Pastor Herb put it, “emerging adults don’t care about doctrine, but care about what the church is *doing*.”

Many young adults are skeptical of service activities that have an implicit agenda of evangelizing. An emerging adult I interviewed explained that “outreach without the evangelical twist is really *really* important to me.” She was relieved to discover Clay’s external ministry program had no such twist: “I guess that reaffirms that there are churches that don’t have a special agenda besides sharing what Jesus did, what his walk was, what his testimony in life was, and trying to live up to that without some type of agenda.” Clay’s external ministry programs are not a ploy to “save” people, or even to get them into the doors of the church, but are part and parcel of a recent church-wide initiative called L.I.F.E. — “Living in Faith Every Day.” This initiative is for the whole church and is part of their external focus, but seems to appeal especially to young adults who desire authentic, holistic faith, rather than compartmentalized religion.

Strategy V: Using, but not Abusing Technology

Clay strategically uses technology as a way to facilitate its ministries. Clay’s staff is careful about using technology for technology’s sake. Rather, they use technology sparingly, and only when it facilitates the real life ministries of the congregation. As mentioned in Strategies I and II, Clay keeps their emerging adult marketing to a minimum, but their website is still an important place where emerging adults can find out about church-wide activities, sign up for external ministry service projects, stream sermons they missed, and generally stay up to date with church life. Perhaps most importantly, having a well-maintained website is valuable because emerging adults who are looking for a church will turn first to the Internet. One emerging adult I interviewed explained that when church shopping with her boyfriend “if the church did not have a good website, then we didn’t even consider going.”

The use of technology during the worship service is less attractive to emerging adults than a lot of older adults believe. One of the reasons why the emerging adults I interviewed prefer the earlier and more traditional worship services to the contemporary praise service is because it uses less technology (e.g., no electric guitars, amps, etc). Clay does use technology in the worship services, but only sparingly and when it facilitates the spoken word. For example, in one of Pastor Kim's sermons, she used Google Earth to show the Temple and to navigate Jesus' travels on Holy Monday. The pastors are careful about the disruptive nature of technology and want to keep space between the outside world which bombards us with tech-media and the sacred nature of the worship services. Pastor Jim explained to me that in the future they plan to experiment with an even more traditional worship service using candles and unplugged instruments—thus removing technology altogether.

Strategy VI: Being Innovative and Adaptive

As an innovative mainline church, Clay is in constant negotiation with the UMC denominational legacy, which brings with it on the one hand traditional ways of doing things, and on the other hand the need to push forward and develop new ideas that are relevant to their particular context (i.e. a 21st-century emerging adult context). The church culture is such that even the older members of the congregation fully support many of the new strategies, even though they may not understand the reasons behind them. Pastor Herb explained to me that there is “no resistance at the church to new ideas, big visions.” With the support of church members behind them, the staff makes it very clear that they are open to trying new ministries, and encourage folks to step up and run with *any* new ideas. This hunger for innovation and openness to adaptability is attractive to emerging adults because it is immediately apparent that Clay is not needlessly stuck in the past, that Clay is willing to adapt to their emerging adult culture, and that the old guard is not resisting change.

Conclusion

It is no secret that mainline Protestantism is on the decline, and new strategies are required if these churches are going to flourish in the twenty-first century. Bringing change to denominations that are centuries old is no easy task, and requires more than a fancy ad campaign or technological savvy. It requires churches to be reflective about the changing culture around them—to engage this culture, but not to collapse into it. To be the distinctive voice of the church, but to be flexible enough to adapt when the culture calls for it. Clay lives in this tension, a theologically orthodox church, but thoroughly inclusive, informal, and innovative. These six strategies, while distinctive to Clay, can be used by churches of all shapes and sizes, because they have little to do with size, budget, or staff, and more to do with creative thinking, patience, and collaboration.