

Middle Collegiate Church

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We know that mainline Protestant churches are in decline and that urban populations are less churched than suburban and rural populations are. Middle Collegiate Church, located in the East Village in New York City, is successfully bucking these trends. It is a thriving congregation with a large, growing membership, committed clergy and lay leaders, and a diverse set of artistic, spiritual, and outreach programs. Perhaps even more surprising, Middle is increasingly attracting and engaging young adults. Around 15 percent of the church's regular participants in weekly worship and other activities are between 18 and 35. How has Middle Church been able to combat the forces of decline that have plagued so many mainline Protestant churches, especially ones in urban areas?

History and Mission of Middle Church

Middle has not always been this successful. It is the oldest continuously existing Protestant church in the United States, and it has a very large endowment due to its ownership of various parts of Manhattan over the years. Still, its historic status and its financial resources have not always been enough to attract new members. Over the past 25 years, it has undergone a dramatic transformation from a dying church of only a handful of elderly members, no programming, and a decaying building to its present flourishing state. In the early 1980s, when the church's denomination (the Reformed Church in America) and the local organization of churches of which it is a member (The Collegiate Churches of New York) were considering closing it, they brought in a new pastor—Rev. Gordon Dragt—as a last ditch attempt to revive it. The church was reborn during the twenty years of his leadership. After his retirement, his successor Rev. Jacqui Lewis (who urges congregants to call her “Jacqui”) has continued many of his

policies while adding some of her own, such as conducting frequent research on the changing needs and concerns of the congregation and its surroundings. Middle has continued to grow under her leadership, and its practices are ones that other churches can learn from in seeking to better attract and engage young adults.

Today, Middle Church proudly advertises its unique history as the oldest church in the United States, a status that ties it directly to Christian history and tradition. That said, it also seeks to “put new wine in new wineskins,” cultivating openness and flexibility and changing in response to the surrounding community’s shifting needs. Its website, bulletins, and other printed materials proclaim four words in lively hues of purple and gold: Bold, Inclusive, Artistic, Welcoming. It seeks to be a church that celebrates difference and newness, including everyone as they are, and making use of the variety of gifts with which people are endowed. Middle’s vision of being “called by God to boldly do a new thing on earth” is spelled out simply and clearly, not only in these four words, but also in the longer vision statement from which they are drawn. The specific practices that embody this mission are key to Middle’s ability to grow and attract young adults. In this essay, I will highlight the practices that I observed over the nine-month period I studied Middle to be most important to Middle’s success.

Including Traditionally Excluded Groups

Middle Church’s mission to create an inclusive culture, and its actual cultivation of such a culture, are central to its success in attracting young adults. Virtually all of the young adults I spoke with mentioned the church’s inclusivity as key in attracting them to the church. They are unwilling and uninterested in attending churches that are still caught up on issues of gender and sexuality, such as whether women should be priests, ministers, or leaders in the church and home and whether GLBTI (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex) people should be fully accepted and embraced by churches. Most have moved beyond being willing even to debate these issues since they believe so confidently that living out one’s gender identity and sexual orientation is not sinful. Instead, they

want to attend a church where equality and inclusivity are the norms or else they do not want to attend a church at all. One young adult explained:

I get really personally offended when I go to religious events and people start talking about abortion, they start talking about gay people, they start talking about “what needs to be done.” And I’m like, what needs to be done is banding together as human beings and making this world a better place. When I go to Middle and I see a sea of faces—gay, straight, black, white, Asian, young, old—I see a future hope in the spirituality of America, of our world.

While inclusivity is essential for the young adults at Middle, they do not want to attend a church where inclusivity is the only goal. Young adults want to find a safe harbor that accepts them as they are while also inspiring them to become better people and to change the world, a balance Middle seeks to maintain.

Further, Middle does not merely tolerate difference. Instead, its members see embodying God’s vision of social justice, of the equality and value of people from a variety of walks of life, as central to the church’s work in “rehearsing the reign of God.” They concretely embrace groups traditionally oppressed by the church by intentionally putting them in leadership roles and making them visible in worship and other activities. Gays and lesbians are part of the church consistory. The Senior Minister is an African-American woman. At Middle, people use inclusive language to talk about God rather than only referring to God using male pronouns such as “he” or “his.” For instance, they pray a version of The Lord’s Prayer each week, but they begin the prayer with “Ever-loving God” rather than “Our Father.” They do not always use neutral language; sometimes they use male words and images to refer to God, but they balance this with female words and images of God as mother, recognizing the important ways in which language about God can influence the degree to which men and women feel welcomed and valued by the church. By “walking the walk” of inclusion rather than just “talking the talk,” Middle is able to create a culture where traditionally excluded young adults (and those who embrace them) feel welcome and comfortable enough, as one young adult explained, “to allow themselves to be

vulnerable” in a way that can enable spiritual growth. Also, the church’s inclusivity itself is a kind of spiritual practice for many of the young adults at Middle. The church’s efforts to put its beliefs about God’s socially just, beloved community into practice help them feel that they can “be transformed as you transform the world,” as the Senior Minister says in a video on the church’s website.

Creating a New Kind of Church Membership

Middle is changing what it means to be a church member. Young adults, especially urban young adults, are highly mobile and busy people. Given this reality, many find it difficult to commit to spending several days a week at a church or making a long-term commitment to a church, as the norms of traditional church membership often require. Instead, young adults attracted to Middle are looking for churches where they have opportunities but not requirements for ongoing engagement outside of weekly services, and where they are not chastised for being gone for several weeks or months when work or other obligations call them away. Middle’s willingness to be flexible about what it means to be a member—not requiring people to affirm doctrinal statements of faith or to commit to specific levels of tithing or volunteering at the church—has been important in attracting and maintaining the engagement of young adults. Similarly, providing frequent opportunities for newcomers to join the church has helped Middle to elicit commitment from people at an earlier stage. They have a new members class every two months, at which time anyone who wants to can join. The lack of obstacles to becoming a member allows Middle to find out about newcomers sooner and for ministers to directly reach out to newcomers to find new ways to engage them in the activities of the church.

Making Worship Celebratory, Collaborative, and Artistic

The church makes weekly worship its first priority, and it both names and plans the worship as a “celebration” rather than the usual term “service.” Middle’s “worship celebrations” are fun. They are organized around a theme, such as the healing of the nations or the feminine characteristics of God, they flow with ease,

and they include laughter, beauty and joy, but they also give witness to societal and personal injustices that people should seek to change. Together, these elements make for weekly services that people want to get up and go to, that leave many of the young adults I spoke with feeling spiritually and emotionally refreshed and renewed as they begin their weeks. One young adult told me he feels filled with a sense of well-being and hope after weekly services, saying, “I am overwhelmed by this emotion of ‘we are all one’ and just ‘God is with us.’” They include a traditional choir, a gospel choir, dance, visual art, puppetry, and other creative elements that engage a variety of the senses and that include a large amount of lay participation. For instance, one Sunday a dancer choreographed a dance to the story of the New Jerusalem that incorporated a long blue cloth symbolizing the river through the city, dancing slowly and beautifully with the cloth as another layperson read the scripture about the river.

In sermons and other church activities, the church emphasizes an overall positive, accepting, hopeful, and empowering message, but it also tries to balance “the smile with a tear.” Middle does not skirt some of the difficult realities of the world, such as racial, gender, and economic injustice, instead raising them as contrary to the will of God and as things that God has given people the power to change. While some young adults I interviewed wish the church would focus more on these “tear-inducing” aspects of reality than it currently does, they are pleased overall with the church’s balancing of acceptance and accountability, praising its primary emphasis on inclusivity and acceptance, which they see as absent in many churches.

The arts are central to Middle’s worship, and their centrality is key for many of the young adults attending the church. The fact that the church incorporates a variety of artistic elements such as dance, puppetry, and visual art, not just musical art as in most churches, gives people a richer and more unique experience. Also, the arts at Middle are typically performed by professionals, some of whom are members of the congregation. The level of excellence and the feeling that one is having an experience that is truly transcendent are important to many of the young adults there, as is the authenticity of having artists perform

at the church who are also performing in many other venues besides churches, such as local shows, bars, and clubs.

Creative, fun, collaborative, artistic, and meaningful worship does not happen by itself. The Senior Minister plans out worship for the entire following calendar year right after the Easter season, drawing up a preaching schedule, developing an overall theme for the year, and articulating sermon titles and themes for each week of the year. While this is a tremendous amount of work, it allows for more thematic continuity, for greater opportunities to invite others to participate in the services, for more creativity with the elements of the service, and for advertising the services ahead of time online.

Being Strategic about Organizational Branding and the Use of Technology

At a conference designed to train progressive religious leaders that I attended, Middle's Senior Minister complained that a lot of people look down on strategic planning because it is something that corporations do, and church people often see corporations as evil. She said "strategic planning is not from the devil!" and everyone laughed. Indeed, Middle Church prioritizes strategic practices like branding, developing a set of words, colors, and images that represent their goals and that are repeatedly used in all of their documents, ads, and online to the point that they become recognizable as symbols of the church.

Middle also emphasizes the strategic use of technology. This does not mean using PowerPoint during services, which the young adults I spoke with did not find appealing as it takes away from the transcendent aspect of worship. Rather, Middle has an online presence that is well-maintained. Developing a distinct, lively, consistent message is important in attracting young adults, especially when it comes to portraying that message through online media. Middle's website and many of its print documents and signs were designed by a consulting firm, an endeavor which required a financial investment but has produced impressive results. Additionally, Middle pays staff to maintain its website on a regular (almost daily) basis. Because many young adults today look

for churches on the internet, a church's website or Facebook group will be the first (and perhaps only) chance a church has to convince young adults that it has something to offer them. For this reason, developing and maintaining a unique, lively, easy to navigate, informative online presence should be a priority for all churches seeking to attract young adults.

Building a Young Adult Community Based Partly on Social Justice Work

Many of the young adults at Middle want to be at a church with other young adults, so creating a visible young adult community is important in attracting young adults. Middle seeks to make young adults visible in the church by making them ushers, putting them in leadership positions, and incorporating them into participatory roles in the weekly worship services. Also, the church recently started a young adult group, tentatively called "Middle Millennials," which has around 40 participants, has its own Facebook page and email listserv, and meets formally and informally several times a month for various activities. The group's parameters for membership are open, but almost everyone in the group is between 20 and 35. Most are also single, though a few in the group are married or partnered. The Senior Minister has held brunches and happy hours for the young adults in her apartment, a ministry intern taught a class for the group on spiritual writing, and the group will soon be taking a retreat to a nearby island. Though Middle could be doing more in this regard, its current efforts in building a young adult group and making young adults as visible as possible at the church seem to be paying off, with the group's size growing over the past few months. Through efforts like these, young adult newcomers (whether to the website or to the actual church) can see that this is a place where people like them are both present and valued.

The young adults attracted to Middle want to be with other young adults because they are at a similar life stage and are looking for community and friendship. But they want more than just personal spiritual growth and social ties from their participation in the church's young adult group. Many also want to

reach out to the surrounding community and the world through social justice work or social service activities. They do not want the group to become entirely about these issues—they do not primarily come to church for political reasons, for instance—but they do want a way to band together on working with God to “make the world a better place,” as was emphasized by the young adult I quoted earlier.

Cultivating Reflexivity and Adaptability

Finally, research and openness to change are both central to congregational life at Middle. Church staff members frequently include surveys in the bulletins at weekly worship and email surveys to members on its listserv. They also hold focus groups and regularly conduct what they call “one-on-ones” with members, in which they talk to them about what the church is doing right and how it could improve. By regularly checking in with members and attendees about what they enjoy about the church, what they don’t, and why, the staff can gauge the direction in which church programs should be moving.

As valuable as the research itself is, simply doing this research will not get a church anywhere if it is not open to actually changing in response to the feedback it receives from congregants. Middle actually makes changes based on the comments it receives, brainstorming about ways to address people’s shifting needs and concerns and then experimenting with new ways of being church. Together, research and willingness to change can be powerful tools in attracting new members, particularly young adults whose needs and concerns today often differ from those that churches have traditionally addressed in the past. In its willingness to be reflexive and adaptable, Middle is similar to some evangelical churches that have been willing to do this with their worship style and ads, if not with their doctrines.

Conclusion

Can other mainline Protestant churches learn from Middle? Absolutely, but I suspect that some will have doctrinal objections to the openness of Middle. But as Middle’s Senior Minister said in a sermon one Sunday, “we have to figure out what is central to the story and focus on that.” For Middle, the basic story is about

a God who loves humanity and pursues humanity, even when humanity turns away. Middle focuses on celebrating that God and seeking to draw closer to that God and to other people, including those who might be different. Things churches have traditionally emphasized, like “sins” and maintaining boundaries between groups and religions, may not actually be central to the church’s “story.” Other churches must decide whether their own doctrines are important enough to maintain when the church is declining or whether they are less essential than meeting young adults where they are and ministering to their existing needs.

Churches may also feel that it is too difficult to provide the high quality worship and programs that Middle does without an endowment. However, many of the practices outlined here are ones that are possible through prioritizing, planning, flexibility, creativity, and passion. For instance, churches may feel that it is too difficult to cultivate diversity or the arts at their churches. But this is something that can initially be achieved by creating partnerships with community groups to work on common issues, such as asking a group of people of a different ethnicity to form a meals program with the church or asking a local dance troupe to participate in worship. Making liturgy more genuinely a collaborative “work of the people” could make an enormous difference. The keys are to be open to welcoming people as they are, making it easier for them to get involved, and being willing to change when the life of the community requires it.