

Faith & Leadership

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Anthony B. Robinson: How to reach young adults

The author and United Church of Christ minister has eight suggestions for reaching Generation Next, starting with the reminder: We're not just another social club or civic group.

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#)



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June 19, 2012 | In my travels as a speaker and consultant working with congregations and their leaders, I am often asked, “How can we reach 20- and 30-year-olds?” Probably most folks would like to say, “How can we *get* 20- and 30-year-olds?” -- but “reach” sounds a bit less self-interested.

My first general thought is that our enthusiasm for our church and confidence in the Christian faith needs to come through. That attitude is likely to make us more interesting and attractive to those who might be looking for a church.

If we feel bad about ourselves, if we are anxious about our future or our survival, that tends to come through -- and not in a positive way.

Churches and their leaders also need to dare to challenge folks in their 20s and 30s (along with everyone else) with the height and depth, length and breadth of the gospel and the Christian faith.

Sometimes we seem inclined to kowtow to youth. So we file off faith’s sharp edges and pull our punches. But that’s counterproductive. The best of the 20- and 30-somethings I know seem more interested in a challenge than in a faith that is dumbed-down or lukewarm.

Beyond these two general comments, let me offer eight suggestions for congregations that want to be hospitable to the next generation.

1. Make it spiritual. The core business of religion is -- surprise -- religion; we’re not a social club, civic organization or political party. Honestly ask, “Are we growing spiritually, in faith and discipleship?” “Are we offering others opportunities to deepen faith?”

2. A corollary: Make it about God. People want to experience the holy, the divine, the sacred. They are dying for

want of grace, wonder, mystery -- not for want of bylaws, committees or sign-up sheets. At least, they don't want those things instead of God.

3. Make it personal. Faith has to mean something in my daily life. If church deals only in vague pieties and abstractions without personal connection, forget it. If phrases like "Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior" or the Lord's Prayer are just the liturgical version of Muzak, you have a problem -- and an opportunity for change.

4. Make it real, authentic. We no longer live in a world where many people go to church out of a sense of social obligation. Just going through the motions, checking off boxes on the "to-do" list won't do it. What are the issues and questions people are facing and struggling with? What light does the gospel shed on them?

5. Value the power of cross-generational community and relationships. Increasingly, we live in mono-generational enclaves. Speak of the importance of friendship and contact across the generations and then live that out in the way you do church.

6. Make it work for busy lives. Time is the new currency; don't ask people to waste it. This is particularly true in many young or single-parent families, where people are working full time plus. Offer more short-term ways to engage, such as one-day mission projects, two- or three-week study series. Offer activities for parents to do with their kids.

7. Get over the idea that every member has to be on a committee, or otherwise involved in management, programs or policies. Remember the old Reformed teaching that the first call of laity is to "present Christ to and for the world," through their work, their relationships and their citizenship. The primary job of those in the congregation is not to manage the church (though we need some people to be involved in that way). Their primary job is to live their faith in home, workplace and community.

8. Make congregational leadership a spiritual-growth and relationship-building experience. That means preparing people to serve as spiritual leaders, then allowing them to function as spiritual leaders. Make room for new people and new ideas. Sometimes in opening up to others we open up to and for God.

It's not easy to engage Generation Next. But it's important. And who said being the church was going to be easy?