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Pastors Call a Truce on 'Sheep-Stealing'

In Charlotte, churches cooperate in an experiment to attract twenty-somethings.

By [NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY](#)

Charlotte, N.C.

If you've been to church lately, you probably know how unusual it is to see a critical mass of young people in attendance. According to studies by the Barna Group, church engagement falls by as much as 43% between the ages of 18 and 29. Which is why the scene on a recent night in uptown Charlotte, N.C., was so remarkable.

Young people were streaming into a beautifully adorned United Methodist Church, and by the time the lights dimmed for the Christian rock band Gungor (and their opening act, The Brilliance), the capacity crowd numbered more than 600. The audience was not, by and large, made up of members of United Methodist.

Rather, the mostly single professionals and students were brought here by Charlotte ONE, a collaboration of 40 or so area churches trying to reach this demographic. Such regular and extensive cooperation of mainline and evangelical Protestant churches from every major denomination is not a typical feature of American religious life. They are more likely to be competing for each other's members. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

Many of the more than 700 churches in this area (and all over the country, for that matter) have tried to run so-called young-adult ministries—but with little success. James Michael Smith, a co-founder of Charlotte ONE, tells me that a common problem is the return on investment: "Young adults are the least reliable, the most mobile and they don't give financially either." In order even to get them in the door, he adds, churches have to offer "the wow factor."

But the wow factor—expensive bands, charismatic preachers, elaborate social events—doesn't come cheap. What's more, many religious leaders worry that offering that kind of experience only encourages young people to think about "the attractational church," the kind of place you go for entertainment but not for any long-term commitment.

The organizers say they are happy to see the free market at work in other arenas, but they worry that "shopping for God," as one book title recently had it, is not an appropriate way to view faith.

So a group of evangelical and mainline Protestant leaders here decided to create one young adult ministry that would provide all of the bells and whistles required, without replacing church. Charlotte ONE does not perform baptisms, weddings, funerals or offer communion. It doesn't meet on Sundays or have a single pastor in charge. Sermons are "bible-based" and generally evangelical in their outlook, but the leaders try to steer clear of controversial issues (religious and political) that might divide their sponsoring churches.

Charlotte ONE's organizers see it as a kind of "funnel," taking in a wide swath of people and trying to pour them out in the right direction. The group takes its motivation from Jesus' words in John 17:23: "Let them be one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as much as you have loved me."

Feedback suggests that the effort is meeting its objectives. In one survey, 98% of attendees said the program had "enriched [their] personal relationship with Jesus Christ," and 42% said that it had helped them "connect . . . to local churches." Another measure of success is that other religious communities are looking to reproduce the experience. Phoenix ONE launched this spring.

One question about these collaborative efforts is whether they serve the larger cause of religion in public life as much as they serve individual churches. Rodney Stark, co-director of the Institute for the Study of Religion at Baylor University, is a skeptic who argues that competition among churches—including "aggressive marketing" of the wow factor kind—has helped to boost church membership. He argues that competition has made America a more vibrant religious marketplace, especially in contrast to Europe.

But competition has downsides as well. The leaders of the Charlotte ONE collaboration call the competition approach "sheep-stealing," as in poaching from the flock of other churches, and they say that it isn't very "Christ-like" behavior.

Seeing a company go under because another one made a better widget is not the same as watching a church have to close its doors because the one down the street has hipper music or a better social scene. Even from a nonreligious perspective, there is a cost to competition. Long-term commitment to a church creates the kind of civic capital that every generation—even the millennial-born hipsters—could use.

Ms. Riley writes frequently about religion for the Journal.

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