



Church for the Under-Forty Crowd: Attracting Younger Adults to Congregational Life

by Sarah B. Drummond

On the cubicle where she works all day, Abby has pinned a picture of a church. Where many would keep a photo of family members or beloved pets, Abby has an image of a brownstone building on the Cambridge Common, and she looks at it whenever she feels anxious or unmoored. At twenty-five, Abby has seen more life than the average young adult. She moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts from the West Coast when her high-school-sweetheart husband had an opportunity to pursue a graduate degree there. Not long after they relocated, however, the marriage fell apart, leaving Abby in a city with no stable job, no friends, and no family. What she did have, however, was First Church in Cambridge (FCC), a church she had first found with her husband and that later helped her through the transition to singlehood. She now views the church as her anchor, and as she considers options for graduate school for herself she is seriously considering staying in Cambridge so that she does not have to leave the church behind.

FCC is, in many ways, a typical United Church of Christ congregation. The music is usually classical, the liturgy rooted in Christian history and decidedly traditional. Boards and committees make many of the church's decisions through a conventional governance structure. The ministry staff includes a senior pastor, an interim associate pastor, and a lay minister of religious education. The community where the church is located is highly educated and liberal, and the church's stance on social issues reflects this environment. What makes the church truly different from many of its peers is not just that it is growing—many churches do that—but the demographic category within its membership that is growing most quickly: postcollegiate adults in their twenties and thirties. At one new-member Sunday in early 2008, out of thirty new members, twenty-seven were under the age of thirty-five.

What is FCC's secret?

There is no easy answer to that question. But many religious leaders would like to have at least an inkling as to how this mainline Protestant church has been able to attract a critical mass of new members from such a fluid and complex population. Among the leaders who are curious about this trend are ministers and lay leaders at FCC.

In 2007–2008, FCC designed and implemented a church-wide program on Christian “faith practices” for all of its members, offering them the opportunity to explore the ways in which they were living out their faith through Christian practices such as hospitality, keeping Sabbath, and testimony. They used Dorothy Bass’s *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*¹ as a text and guide in this inquiry as the congregation together sought to understand what it means to be Christian and part of a faith community. Building on this study, in 2008–2009 FCC initiated a second faith practices program focusing on younger adults. They deployed seminarians toward the purpose of reaching out to the younger adults who had found their way, through various means, to FCC.

This second program for younger adults worked this way: Senior minister Dan Smith approached the seminarians the church had “in care” (the seminary and divinity school students the church was supporting through the UCC ordination process). He invited them to consider creating short, focused outreach programs meant to connect with younger adults in the congregation. Each program was to focus on a particular faith practice, either one from Bass’s anthology or another related Christian practice. The church

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gave each seminarian a small stipend and some program planning funds to get the outreach effort off the ground. Ultimately, five seminarians submitted proposals for outreach programs. The faith practices they chose included parenting, service, personal stewardship, fasting, and discernment. Each seminarian designed a program, implemented the plan, and then reported back to each other and church leaders about what they did and what they learned.

I participated in this initiative first through helping the seminarians to design their projects and later as a researcher. Hoping to learn more about how younger adults approach faith communities and how they engage faith practices, I interviewed all of the program leaders and seven participants. As expected, the project generated a great deal of learning about the faith issues of young adults and what these particular participants sought (and did not seek) in a church. None of the findings of the study gave obvious instruction for churches that seek to connect with those between twenty and forty years of age, but some of the tensions the interviews surfaced give helpful food for thought to those who seek to engage younger adults.

Tension 1: Flexibility, But with High Expectations

One of the basic questions one must ask when considering the faith lives of younger adults is who, exactly, is in this demographic category? The program FCC sponsored through the leadership of seminarians identified younger adults who had finished college but had not necessarily put down roots. They saw their lives as transitory, not just because they had moved a lot (although they had), but because they had not yet made long-term commitments to a neighborhood, a vocation, or in many cases a life partner. Those who had children had young children; those who were married were not yet established in coupledom. Although some participants argued that the differences between single, coupled, and parenting young adults merited further slicing and dicing of the demographic, they all described the population into which they fall as one that is in flux and not yet peacefully ensconced in a way of life. As one participant put it, “I think you’re just living in a sort of roller-coaster of events that unfolds, and there isn’t a lot of stability in your life, and there’s a lot of looking forward to ‘ok, what’s the next thing?’ It’s a unique stage in your life, where you’re coming into your own, finding out who you are, finding out what your responsibilities are, and what you want to do with the time you have.”

The young adults included in this study spoke of a sense of yearning for meaning and community that they thought they could find in a church. They described having arrived at what one might call a younger adult plateau, where “you’ve done all your ‘firsts’ and you feel a little settled and willing to grow.”

They also spoke of a sense of busyness—even beleaguerment—that made conventional church participation difficult for them. The seminarian who created a program on parenting for younger adult parents bemoaned the fact that many potential participants simply could not make the time to participate. “It seemed to me that people were sincere in their desire, and yet the hurdles were also very real.”

After the seminarians’ focused programs came to an end, the group of program planners came together with the church’s clergy and me to talk about what they had learned. All agreed that some form of a “ladder” approach to program planning had been essential, where there were different levels of involvement from which participants could choose.

For example, the fasting program included two didactic sessions on the meaning and history of fasting at the beginning of Lent and a feast right after Easter. In between those two bookends, the program leader hosted a Google group where participants posted what they were learning and experiencing through fasting. The program leader was surprised when she learned that some people who never participated in the Google discussion were actually reading posts every day and reported gaining a great deal of strength for their own fasts through doing so.

“I think that being able to plug into the group whenever and wherever you are was really helpful for people,” this program leader reported. “Some of these people who were fasting

at work would go on the group during their lunch break, which if we only met Wednesdays at 7 pm they couldn't have done."

It is easy for program leaders to criticize and judge those who participate at a low level as lacking commitment. These young adults' experiences remind leaders that even those who do not give high levels of input can garner important lessons from the most tangential of participation.

And yet not all agreed that this flexibility, which was essential to the success of the groups, was a good thing for the participants or the church. One group leader pointed out that younger adults have high expectations for how much their experiences will engage them; passive participation is not something to which they are drawn. And yet, at the same time, another group leader pointed out, they have an understanding of "joining" that does not even necessarily involve showing up: they can join a Facebook cause and never meet any of their fellow revolutionaries.

Ultimately, program leaders concurred that they had to, as one put it, "be intentional about offering diverse ways of plugging in," but some wondered whether offering high levels of flexibility was necessarily a healthy paradigm. As one seminarian remarked, "If they came looking for community, [and] they're going to get more intensive community if they put more into the community, then are we selling people short by not challenging them to really take responsibility?" Said another, "This is a big conundrum in the life of any community: how do you allow different people to be in different places at different times in the life of a community? Because that's what people need, and I'm not sure what it will look like for people when our generation is running the church."

Much of the criticism one hears about the different participation patterns of younger adults in churches stems from anxiety that a low level of commitment means the church of the future will lack leadership. Yet the fluid nature of younger adulthood mirrors this participation pattern, suggesting that less fluid times will lead to more consistent participation, and therefore leadership, for younger adults who remain engaged in faith communities throughout their adulthood.

Tension 2: Welcoming, But Not Desperate

All interview participants and program leaders at some point spoke about the hospitality they found at FCC. They described having needed, in a tumultuous or tenuous time in life, to have a place where they felt they belonged and where the community was glad they were there. Yet the nature of the welcome they received had a particular flavor to it that many found essential to their comfort in the church: the welcome did not feel needy.

As one interview participant said, "It's hard to sort of quantify, because you want a church to be welcoming. You don't want them to ignore newcomers—strangers—but then, on the other hand, you don't want there to be this feeling of desperation. My experience at First Church has just been extremely positive that way—that people are welcoming, people introduce themselves, but it's in a very nonthreatening way. It's sort of just saying, 'This is who we are here at First Church, and we welcome you to come and join us if you want to.'"

Several participants juxtaposed this sense of welcome with what they had found in other churches: a phenomenon I came to call the "Carol Anne Syndrome." In the 1980s film *Poltergeist*, a home built on top of a relocated graveyard becomes haunted by spirits that do not wish to be dead. Those spirits steal away a small, vital child (named Carol Anne) because she reminds them of the joy of living. In a similar way, when younger adults enter a church that is dying, they often feel as though the welcome they receive seeks to tap into their resources without any regard to the spiritual needs the younger adult might have; they fear becoming that church's Carol Anne. One program leader talked about being invited to join a church committee on her very first visit to a new church. These kinds of welcomes led younger adults to feel overwhelmed and more needed than welcomed.

The following comments sum up many of the feelings expressed: "As opposed to being

part of something that is going to nurture me and be nurtured by me [my] being there would be solely to try and help the community. It wouldn't be that kind of reciprocity of support. I would be coming back with them out of feelings of guilt or obligation rather than for me," said one interviewee. "I felt really sorry for them," said another, "and so that made it feel like to continue going there would be sort of out of pity, or like an act of charity, and that was not appealing."

Many program participants reported that one of the things that drew them to FCC was the presence of others in their age group. Some pointed out the chicken/egg irony, where a church needs to have younger members to attract younger members. This said, the underlying emotion set related to that sense of comfort seems to have been a way in which FCC set the hospitality thermostat to just the right temperature to help a younger adult feel welcome without feeling pressure. By appearing joyful themselves and also happy to welcome newcomers, FCC members caused younger adults to feel embraced out of a sense of abundance rather than one of scarcity.

Tension 3: Believing, But Not Dogmatic

Many participants in this study described a sense of comfort they derived at FCC from knowing where the church was coming from theologically. Though one might conjecture that younger adults, often fresh out of secular colleges, would feel most at home in a setting where the Christian message was watered down, the younger adults I interviewed appreciated that the church knows who and whose it is. This comfort seemed to have many layers to it.

First, the younger adults I interviewed appreciated the church's honesty about its Christian worldview and would not have cottoned to a cloaked message. Said one participant, "I feel like young adults are extremely media savvy, very sophisticated consumers of advertising and marketing. Learning to be really sophisticated in consuming information, I think that when you come into a place where you feel like 'I can kind of relax a little bit. They're going to try and sell me something, it's Jesus; they said that, it's pretty clear.'"

Second, they commented on the integrity of the church's purported vision and how it was reflected in the way church members behaved toward them. Tying back to the example of the welcome they received, several indicated that the church's intentional vision—which was generated out of a great deal of work on the part of the church's leaders and members—is a way of hospitality (see <http://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/pages/about/vision/>). The younger adults interviewed understood that the welcome they received was part of the church's effort to live out its stated vision. This congruence between what the church did and what it said was highly attractive to what one participant called "cynical Gen-X types."

They also, however, appreciated the way in which the church welcomed their doubts and questions. One described her decision to join FCC this way: "I got sucked in by a sermon." She went on to describe a sermon that questioned whether a just God would have crushed Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. She had never heard a minister openly question the Bible, and she found this freeing. "When I started coming to First Church," she said, "I was definitely a questioner. I didn't really lose faith per se, between the faith that I had as a child and then coming back as an adult, but it definitely changed dramatically."

This participant's comments reflect what those who study faith development might consider common knowledge: younger adults redefine the faiths of their childhoods as they formulate their adult belief systems. Perhaps because of its relatively highly educated population, this permission to question seemed particularly important at FCC. Participants indicated that they could not have felt comfortable in a church that required them to withhold questions and forego critical thinking.

Conclusion

What does it take for a church to be attractive to a younger adult? The initiative at FCC brings to light that churches should consider how they might be (1) flexible while honoring the importance of commitment, (2) welcoming but not desperate-sounding,

and (3) overt about theology while making room for doubt. Clearly, these tensions present more questions than they do answers. But as many churches are led to believe that following fads—such as audio-visual technology or “theology on tap”—is the only way to reach younger adults, these tensions present opportunities for a more nuanced conversation. Younger adults are savvy when someone is trying to sign them up for something, draw them into something, or sell them something. May they also be savvy to how much they have to gain, and how much is at stake for them, as they seek to join with a community to find meaning in their lives.

Sarah Drummond is the author of *Holy Clarity: The Practice of Planning and Evaluation*. To learn more about this book or to place an order, see <http://www.alban.org/bookdetails.aspx?id=8010>.

NOTE

1. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass, Second Revised Edition (Jossey-Bass, 2010). For more information, see *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Susan R. Briehl (Upper Room, 2010) and www.practicingourfaith.org.

Questions for Reflection

1. If you are not currently a younger adult, but are further along in life, what do you remember about your church participation patterns when you were between twenty and forty years old? How might patterns be different or similar today?
2. Consider your own faith community. What areas of tension do you feel you have addressed? Is your church flexible about program participation while also honoring the importance of commitment? Welcoming but not needy? Celebrating belief without dogmatically enforcing a particular worldview?
3. What areas of tension do you believe present challenges for your church’s way of doing business?
4. Consider a younger adult you know. What might she or he seek by way of community, support, and meaning-making? How might a church address those hungers?

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