

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults
ChristWay Community Church, Ooltewah, Tennessee

By Carole Kilcher

ChristWay Community Church (CWCC) is located at 6201 Mountain View Road in Ooltewah, Tennessee, not far from the Georgia state line. The name reflects the church's mission to "follow Christ and walk in his Way." It was first organized as Central Baptist Church with 53 members in 1887. After several relocations, in 2001 the congregation moved to Ooltewah.

Ooltewah is a suburban community in Hamilton County outside Chattanooga. The church building faces Interstate 75, the major highway between Knoxville and Atlanta. As of 2011, Ooltewah's population was 7,623. Since 2000 it has had a population growth of 34 percent. The Little Debbie snack cake plant and Blue Planet factory have been located here for many years. More recently, Volkswagen moved part of its Passat manufacturing operation to the area. In addition, the Amazon.Com facilities are now fully operating at nearby Enterprise South Industrial Park.

The church is located next door to Ooltewah High School with an enrollment of 1,242 during the 2011-2012 school year. It has an active ministry at the high school. More important to this case study is the fact that there are five colleges and universities with over 20,900 full-time students within 16 miles of the church. Three miles away in Collegedale is Southern Adventist University with 2,273 students. Chattanooga State Community College is nine miles away with an enrollment of 4,410. The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga with 8,652 students is 13 miles away. About 15 miles away in Cleveland, Tennessee, is Lee University with an enrollment of 3,586 and Cleveland State Community College with 2,031 students.

CWCC has a pastoral staff of four, including Lead Pastor John Waters, Executive Pastor Kevin Preston, Worship Leader Matt Coleman and Minister to Students Matt Moore. They have three support staff. Affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, the church is "Bible-focused" and led by a group of lay elders, not the pastor alone or an elected body.

The church is housed in a remodeled, repurposed industrial building where Arnold Palmer golf clubs were once manufactured. A portion of the warehouse is unfinished but available for expansion. Although connected to completed hallways, the vast expanse and cement floor is an alternative area used occasionally for events that are not appropriate for carpeted floors.

A number of cozy areas are set apart for fellowship and ministry. These include, but are not limited to the following: sitting areas with couches, lamps, and tables in various places throughout; two Bistros, one of which is specifically for those in grades 9-12; the ChristWay Theater; a café, the upstairs Attic; the Living Room, which is a prayer room with soft lights and more couches and chairs; as well as the Worship Center.

In the large foyer there is a square information desk called “Connection Central”. A visitor can learn more about the church here. There are a variety of brochures and informational papers laid out on the counter. First time visitors are given a steel water bottle with the church website embossed on it and a ticket for a free breakfast at the Bistro, where coffee and breakfast foods are available.

The Worship Center

Entering the Worship Center one observes movable padded chairs and a stage with no decorations. Two large video screens flank either side of the stage. Theater-like stage lights allow for change in color and other lighting effects. A professional camera is on a tripod on a platform along the right side of congregation facing the stage. Sound boards and video control equipment are housed in the back. A roving camera person captures on-stage action.

During the school year, three services are held to accommodate worshippers. The philosophy is that if there is room to park and if people do not feel cramped in worship, they will come. Additionally the various children’s classrooms can only legally hold so many individuals at any given time.

CWCC makes a point of being casual and accepting. Attendees may wear whatever makes them comfortable, and are free to bring their coffee into the worship center. They may choose their own seat or have an usher assist them. If it is raining, volunteers meet cars with umbrellas, making sure everyone gets inside as dry as possible.

An Account of One Worship Service

A video counts down seven minutes on both large screens to the minute the service begins with music from a band. The instruments of the band include a keyboard, four electric guitars and a drum set. Those players are joined by one male lead vocalist and two female back-up singers. Members of the band must audition for a position in the band. The music is contemporary, loud and lively. The church once tried to have another room where the music was streamed and volume could be controlled. They

tried it for a few weeks but hardly anyone came. Those in attendance participate in singing and praising the Lord.

James Howard and Brian Smith, wearing yellow t-shirts inscribed with the CWCC motto, "Changing the way you think about church," give the announcements in a pre-recorded video called "In The Know." They banter back and forth with good humor while outlining what is coming up during the coming week and preparing the congregation for the important items in the immediate weeks ahead. There are no church bulletins but each week's "In the Know" is immediately posted on the church website.

The lights change and focus on Pastor Waters who this week is sitting on a stool. He wears very casual clothes. He announces that his notes are on the cell phone Bible "You Version" if anyone wants to follow along.

He bases his sermon on Acts 9 and 1 and 2 Timothy, talking about the importance of a church's responsibility to make disciples. Making disciples, he says, takes time but is the responsibility of every partner of the congregation, not just the pastors and elders.

He asks the congregation to stand if any comment he is about to make applies to them. First he asks how many, when in an elevator, prefer to look at the lights denoting which floor it is on rather than the others in the elevator. He then asks how many like cats. After several icebreaking questions such as these, the audience is responding. Then Pastor Waters asks how many gave their hearts to the Lord at a big Billy Graham crusade or any other large public evangelistic meeting. A few respond. Finally he asks, "How many can name one or two people who invested in your life and led you to the Lord?" Hundreds rise. Pastor Waters concludes, "We must invest in others' lives if we are going to be a disciple-making church."

Interview with Youth/Young Adult Pastor

On June 6, 2012, the author interviewed Matt Moore, CWCC's youth pastor, who oversees the college program. He relies heavily on mature Christians who volunteer to lead out in the Life Groups for this age group. Young adult Life Group leaders work closely with Pastor Moore; however, his primary responsibility is to the high-school age group.

During the interview he told me that the Worship Center seats approximately 500 worshipers. The annual growth for the last five years has been noticeable. When Pastor John Waters became the lead pastor, there were 100 or fewer individuals attending on any given Sunday. Three years later, when he joined the team, 300

individuals were involved. Pastor Moore estimated that there are now more than 800 regular attendees and visitors seeking fellowship and worship at CWCC.

Pastor Moore and his team work to transition high school seniors into the church's young adult-college age group. The goal is to focus ministry on life-stages through circles of fellowship and Bible study. For example, one of the high school girls' groups is co-led by a mature Christian and a young adult as a role model to the younger girls. In 2012, a mission trip to Haiti sponsored by CWCC was an enriching experience for high school seniors, allowing them to get away from their norm and obtain a wider perspective.

One member whose children are in the high school age group said, "Frankly, my kids are the reason I come to this church. They want to come to all the activities and be with their friends. I guess I would come if they didn't because I am involved, but some Sundays I know I would be tempted to sleep in."

Many young adult ministries struggle with moving people from one stage to another. A ministry that begins as a young adult ministry changes as its members change, becoming a family-oriented church, then a church of older people who are struggling to reach young adults in its own turn. CWCC's solution to this is to maintain age limits. A member named Amy said that she had recently been "kicked out" of the college age group that she had attended for a long time. "Well, not kicked out, really. The church just changed the age from 19 to 29, and made the top age limit 25. I guess they knew that some of us would never leave if they didn't." Amy shared that she loved the group study and its activities but now that she is married she volunteers in the children's areas at church and enjoys that also. In her opinion, young adults stay with this congregation because they are involved in its running and leadership.

Pastor Matt stated that the age range was changed to 18 to 25 because of their philosophy that their job is to help individuals make a healthy transition into their next stage of life. Whereas someone may still be in college at age 29 or beyond, they have (or should have) moved to the next stage of life. They may have a spouse, a child or children and their relationship with Jesus and personal goals are usually different from that of an 18-year-old. They have no record of the exact percentage of the general membership that are between the ages of 18 and 29.

Life Groups are key to the young adult ministry at CWCC. In addition, they also take advantage of opportunities for group projects, retreats and the Passion Conference, which in 2012 was held January 2-5 in nearby Atlanta. During the summer months, the

young adults meet for Bible Study or just to “hang out” at the homes of Joey and Tiffanie Wilson and Justin and Leslie Kilgore.

CWCC also believes in learning by watching. When the college-age group meets in the home of married couples who hold jobs, they learn by observation what their life can look like in the future. “The one thing we can be sure of is that if there is food they will come!” exclaims Matt with a smile. They are encouraged not only to eat and meet but to learn of venues where their talents and spiritual gifts can be used. Pastor Moore said, “We set expectations for them that church is a place to belong and serve.”

The thing all young adults have in common is the desire to have a place to connect, to belong, and to have an experience that meets their needs in worship. Building relationships with mature Christians helps them see what they can have in the next stage of their life.

Because young adults are busy with school, work and other obligations Matt described how they are working to have a Life Group in every community near the college campuses that the church serves. During the summer months Life Groups do not meet regularly but a listing of times young adults will meet is listed on the website. The young adults who are able are encouraged to participate in one of the missions outside their comfort zone during the summer. When asked about the budget for his area of ministry he told me that they were not willing to give out that information.

Pastor Moore concluded by saying, “The leadership is not striving to have CWCC become a mega church where nobody knows your name. God is doing scary things with the growth of this church and our job is to be ready for what He is doing next.”

On-Site Interviews of Young Adult Worshipers

Having visited before, but wanting to learn more, I attended CWCC again in June of 2012. I was very impressed when Beth, the executive administrative assistant of CWCC, spoke to me by name even though we had only met once before, when I came to interview the pastor.

On this day, I went to the Bistro and elected to visit with a young adult who was sitting alone at one of the tables. She had the black shirt on with the motto of the church: “Changing the way you think about church.” I asked her if she was in the college-age Life Group. She replied that she is 22 and meets in a group at another church. Interested, I asked, “What draws you to this church enough to keep coming back when you are in a group at another congregation?”

She replied, "It is because this church is different from all the others. I like the band instead of a choir. I like how Pastor John's messages speak to issues I am dealing with or need to hear. He encourages us to use our cell phones for the Bible passages using the 'You Version' app and even puts his sermon notes up on You Version 'Live' so we can follow along."

After thanking her for her time I visited the "Attic" where the high school classrooms are located. It is up several flights of steps. The walls are painted black with a montage of texts and sayings written in white paint on the first landing. At the top landing one sees a large room with a stage. That day chairs were arranged in small groups along the edge of the room. Smaller classrooms were evident down a long hallway.

I chatted with a 30-something man who told me he was the teacher for the Grade 11 boys. I asked him why their high school youth ministry is separated by both grade and gender. He said they find that boys open up much more easily when not mixed in with girls. The same is true that the girls open up among other girls, although not as much as the boys do when taught alone. The separation by grade is because they have found that these are the times when their life stage is in transition. This is the way the adult teacher/mentor can be a friend to them, guide them and give instruction in what they specifically need at that stage of their life. The goal is to transition them into the next stage in healthy ways and keeping them in the church as they become young adults. This particular teacher suggested that in his experience he had never seen a youth/young adult ministry program in a church as effective as this at CWCC.

I went to the Worship Center for the 10:30 service. There were young adults sitting near me. There are no young small children in the worship center as they are being served by volunteers in the Big Wazoo or Tree House. At worship, high school teens, young adults and young married couples are in abundance. In stark contrast to most Christian churches, an individual with gray hair is definitely in the minority at CWCC. The congregation at this particular service was made up almost entirely of whites with few minorities. The service is in English.

During the video, "In the Know", this week only Jack Howard gave the announcements. If he is reading it is off a teleprompter, as he speaks with rapid pace and looks straight at the audience. He always wears one of the church-identifying yellow t-shirts. In preparation for Father's Day, he asked for pictures of fathers and sons. He said, "If you have one of you and your son or you and your father on your phone, you can send it right now to pics@christway.org."

In another highlighted announcement, Jack noted the baptism and cook-out was next Sunday. In other matters, materials for the mission trip to St. Louise for college age youth, need to be turned in next week, the flip flops, soccer balls and underwear for the Honduras mission trip are also due by next week. He referred us to a table in the foyer near Connection Central that was displaying items as examples of what was needed.

He said if any Life Group wanted to have something special for their group to do together this summer CWCC would be passing out popsicles at the Collegedale fireworks being held this year on July 3. He asked everyone to wear their CWCC t-shirts. He talked about different ways to deliver prayer requests to those in prayer ministry. These included a phone number, a website and, within the "You Version" Bible App., a place to send prayer requests from one's phone.

A short video was played, leading up to Pastor John's sermon series in the books of Timothy and Titus. When the lights came up, John was seated in one of four chairs at a very nice dining room table with a basket of bread in the center. John's sermons are archived on the CWCC website in both audio and video format. They can be downloaded or listened to online. One can also subscribe to them as a podcast in iTunes so they update automatically.

Today's sermon highlighted the four chairs around the table as representing the four stages of church life leading to one who becomes a mature Christian serving and seeking the lost. He hung a church t-shirt over the first seeker chair then proceeded to explain how it was important that an individual keep growing in Christ and moving around the table to become a mature Christian who disciples another. (See sermon video at <http://christwaychurch.org/media.php?pageID=53>)

Becoming a CWCC "Partner" is a Formal Process

People who join and regularly attend CWCC are known as "partners" rather than members. In order to join the church, one is invited to attend the "Discover ChristWay" new partner orientation. These orientation classes are held at different times throughout the year. A booklet outlining CWCC's distinctive mission, function, values, vision, strategy, theology and membership covenant can be found on ChristWay website. The document also outlines the covenants of the "Baptist Faith and Message" as given by the Southern Baptist Convention on pages 10-16. After conversion and baptism by immersion, a "Partnership Covenant" is signed. It is simple, asking the new "partner" to follow Christ by doing what the Bible asks all believers to do. This is outlined on pages 17-19 of the orientation booklet. Many have been "plugged in" to a Life Group and are already serving in some volunteer role before their baptism.

On-site Observation of Baptism in a Pond

There is a pond in front of the church. A stone baptistry has been formed on the edge of the pond that can be filled with fresh water on the days when a baptism is held.

Typically, two outside baptisms are held during the warmer months. For the one held during the winter a portable baptistry is set up inside. On June 17 at 5 p.m. (Father's Day), the first of the 2012 baptismal events was held. It was much anticipated and well announced in advance both on the web, on the announcement sheets that are in bathrooms and during regular announcement time prior to worship. Baptism at CWCC is a celebration. Worshipers were reminded to bring lawn chairs or blankets and a 2-liter bottle of their favorite soda. A cookout would precede the baptism and there would be inflatables and other activities for the kids.

CWCC baptisms are an event for all ages. During the services in the Worship Center, I had not been able to observe parents with their children due to the intentional separation of adults and the smaller children. Today, I saw a huge number of families with young children. This was particularly apparent where two large inflatables had been set up especially for the younger children to enjoy.

When I went inside the church foyer to use the restroom, I noticed six college-age adults sprawled on couches and the floor having a serious discussion. I wished I might listen in, but did not feel that my timing was appropriate. When I exited the church, Beth told me that 21 individuals were to be baptized that day.

Over the loud speakers came the word that we were to line up to pick up our food. Those being baptized were reminded to meet in the Bistro at 6:15. The church supplied hotdogs already in buns with the typical fixings, coleslaw, a small bag of chips, and a Little Debbie snack cake. (The Little Debbie factory is located in this community.)

At 6:30 the candidates for baptism made two lines. Those who did not formerly have one of the church's t-shirts were now wearing one in blue that had been given to them at the meeting in the Bistro. Other than that identification they each wore what they chose in which to be baptized. Pastor Waters offered prayer and explained that the angels in Heaven were celebrating and that we should be too. He encouraged us to clap and cheer. There are steps at each end of the baptismal leading into the water and first a candidate on the right and then a candidate on the left were baptized.

There were hundreds gathered on the shore and after each candidate emerged from the water a cheer and much clapping ensued. Two young adults were among those

baptized. Their college and Life Group leaders were named by the pastor during their introduction.

Summary

The appeal for young adults at this church is easy to understand when considering the myriads of ways the church gives opportunity to engage them. High school youth are intentionally transitioned into the young adult groups, whether they go to college or not. The philosophy that this is a place to “come as you are” with no need to dress up gives young adults a place with a Starbucks-like feel where they know they will be accepted and find a place to belong. The fact that coffee, breakfast items and fellowship are on-site regardless of which worship service one chooses to attend is an added plus. Belonging is also encouraged in smaller Life Groups that meet during the week in the casual environment of homes of young married couples.

The motto “Changing The Way People Think About Church” embossed on t-shirts that identify CWCC partners is another way young adults feel included within a larger context. In addition CWCC’s ministry functions, not the gospel, have adapted to changing times. This is evident in the pastors’ reference to Facebook or Twitter, the importance of having a media specialist on staff which enables an always-up-to-date website, and use of current technologies which include, but are not limited to, the video countdown and video announcement period each week, podcasts, the use of the “You Vision” Bible site for pastor’s notes, and video archives if a message is missed.

The contemporary nature of the music and the worship service is not all that different from other congregations who have chosen that worship style genre. It is this researcher’s opinion that when compared to other churches in the area, ChristWay Community Church has a reputation for effective strategies for engaging young adults.

Note: I collected a number of materials during my visits which give more detailed examples of how this church conducts its ministry with young adults. Copies of these can be obtained from Monte Sahlin, the executive secretary of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership.

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References

ChristWay Church website: <http://christwaychurch.org>

Background information: www.bestplaces.net/city/tennessee/ooltewah