

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults **The Well, Scotch Plains, New Jersey**

By Gary S. Walter

The Well is a church-within-a-church ministry of Evangel Church, which is a member of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world. They are located at 1251 Terril Road in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, a suburb of Newark and New York City. The ministry is pastored by Mandy Morante, whose husband, Chris Morante, at the time of this writing, was the interim senior pastor of the larger church body.

History and Overview

The Well began as a young adult ministry experiment in 2007. Pastor Chris Morante and his wife Mandy were fresh out of Bible College and had a vision and passion to serve God. They were given permission by senior Pastor Kevin Brennan to begin this ministry.

The Well meets for a weekly Sunday evening service, which is generally followed by a time of coffee and fellowship. Additionally, several times a year, there is a major Coffeehouse event designed primarily for fellowship. *The Well* also offers small groups and global mission opportunities.

Situated in a community that is surrounded by colleges and universities, *The Well* finds itself in constant attendance and population changes. The winter school terms always bring in fresh faces, but many of those students return to their homes during the summer. In addition, many students who attend college outside the area return to their home church after their time at school. Due to these challenges, there does not appear to be a significant growth trajectory; however, *The Well* continues with a stable attendance record.

Attendance averages 40 to 60 at the weekly service. Special services will sometimes draw as many as 80 or 90, and the quarterly Coffeehouse fellowship often draws about 120 people. When asked about the overall size of the congregation, Pastor Mandy suggested that they were reaching 200 to 250 people.

The larger church body of Evangel Church meets in two main services on Sunday morning, at 9 and 11 a.m. On a normal Sunday morning, between 1,600 and 1,800 attend, although there are only 900-plus members. From September to June, there is also a Sunday night service at 7 p.m., called the Encounter. This is a more contemporary-style service with extended worship and teaching. On Wednesday nights, a prayer service called Dwelling Place meets at 7 p.m. This consists of worship, a short teaching presentation, and prayer for various topics.

The community of *The Well* is made up primarily of young adults in their 20s, both single and married, and coming from various ethnic and racial backgrounds. There is a small percentage of people who are over 30 and, like other young adult ministries, *The Well* struggles to transition post-high school youth into their congregation. Services and programs are all in English.

Most of those participating in the ministry have been lifelong members of the sponsoring church and are connected with the Assemblies of God denomination. However, because *The Well* is the most successful young adult ministry in the area, people from other denominations and students who are not members are regular, if not frequent, attenders. Many of them consider *The Well* to be their home church and are not aware of the denominational connections; others are involved in other congregations in the region, but attend *The Well* for their own spiritual enrichment. Still others are hoping to give the Church one last chance before abandoning religion altogether.

Theology, Affiliation and Practices

Although the congregation is firmly Pentecostal in theology and practice, *The Well* does not focus too closely on this foundation. Where the larger church body may have more teaching in the gifts of the Spirit and the associated manifestations, the smaller young adult ministry rarely teaches about or expects these manifestations. The leadership team firmly believe in these and pray that they may one day occur, but because of the cross-denominational congregation, they are sensitive to differing beliefs. Like many young adult ministries throughout North America, the focus is more invitational and salvific, rather than doctrinal and prescriptive.

The leadership team is made up of the two founding pastors and eight other individuals who are very involved in various tasks and responsibilities. The majority of those serving in leadership at this writing were married couples in their late 20s, but recently they had been able to recruit some new leaders in their early 20s.

Evangel Church gave birth to *The Well* under Pastor Chris Morante's leadership. When Senior Pastor Kevin Brennan retired, Pastor Chris became the interim senior pastor and his wife, Pastor Mandy was assigned as the interim pastor of *The Well*. This unique situation allowed the leadership transitions to continue almost unnoticed and the congregation's fluid leadership team absorbed this change easily.

When *The Well* began as an experimental ministry, it was fully funded and approved by the mother church. Pastors Chris and Mandy were given a great amount of freedom to create and nurture the ministry. Early in the process, Senior Pastor Brennan offered confidence, strong mentoring, and permission to fail. It was this support that gave the young pastors what they needed to pursue their vision for the ministry.

Beginning in the fall of 2007, *The Well* sought to provide a strong worship service with great music, quality presentations, and strong preaching. The leadership team placed a premium on gifted musicians, solid technical skills, and enough financial resources to

provide tools to that team. The audio, visual, and technical presentation are intended to produce what the team calls the “wow-factor.” The stage is adorned artistically, with a black background, candles, good lighting, and musical instruments. There is a creative use of drama, video, and computer-generated graphics to accompany the presentations and sermons.

Various members of the leadership team are also regular preachers, and both men and women preach. The preaching team, like the congregation, is multi-ethnic and racially diverse. The worship leaders strive to bring in a healthy mix of pop culture while remaining solidly biblical, practical, and gospel-oriented.

Strengths

The Well is blessed with a strong and unified leadership team. The majority of the leaders have been together since the birth of this ministry, and it is clear they are modeling passion, vision, and service. They each share their gifts and strengths in ways that achieve success.

It is also clear that Pastors Mandy and her husband Chris are strong leaders and their vision is the driving force in *The Well*. This is not to say that others do not share that passion, or are overshadowed by this pastoral team; only that their leadership is what brings focus and direction to the ministry.

Two solid best practices within this young adult congregation include the preaching and worship experiences. The leadership includes several very capable speakers who are able to rotate into this role. Many successful young adult ministries make use of multiple preachers and speakers. *The Well* seems to have found this to be true.

There are several accomplished musicians that enable the weekly worship experience to be one of quality and substance. This undoubtedly is a very positive strength and enables them to attract young adults from around the region.

Technology is a major strength also. From the website to the weekly worship experience, *The Well* obviously has some gifted technologists working for them. Each service is broadcast live and posted on the web for later viewing. The production quality online and live is very good.

Not only has *The Well* survived for five years at this time, but it has maintained a solid focus and continues to reach new people. Their ministry functions are well thought out and well attended. The church is ministering internally and externally, locally, nationally, and globally.

Locally: In addition to a solid weekly worship experience that reaches young adults in real and relevant ways, they have a campus ministry to deliver care packages to students from out of town. This cross-denominational outreach helps students find a faith community when they are away from their hometown churches.

One of the more successful ministries of *The Well* is their occasional coffeehouse fellowship. This is primarily a social event that draws students and young adults from various backgrounds and denominations. It usually draws more people than the other activities, but is also a more transient population. Although *The Well* also advertises small groups, this does not appear to be as strong a ministry as the coffeehouse.

Nationally: In the Fall of 2010, *The Well* sponsored a young adult Thirst Conference that attracted over 500 participants, primarily from the tri-state, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania area. Another event was planned as of this writing, but put on hold during the leadership transitions.

Globally: Over the past five years, the church has gone to Africa three times and sponsored the digging of five wells in various communities which previously were without water. They have also built two steel structures and added brick to one of the buildings. One is used as an HIV Care Center and Orphanage and the other as a church.

Weaknesses

As mentioned earlier, due to the transient nature of student populations, *The Well* struggles to keep young adults that walk in the doors. Not only are many of these students only in the area for nine months or less during the year, but many do not return to the same school. The time challenges faced by students also makes it difficult for them to commit.

Some students attend once a month, or less, many are not affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination, and still others attend for mostly social interests. This not only makes it difficult to attract people who are willing to serve, but also limits opportunities to attract and mentor new leaders. These issues are common to young adult ministries, especially in college towns.

The leadership team of *The Well* is a cohesive group of young adults, but as they grow older, they will find themselves older than the target age of the young adults they seek to attract. This too is a common problem of young adult ministries. The success of the team begins to be a weakness in attracting younger members and leaders.

In addition, the more active leaders are married couples and within young adult ministries there can be a sharp demarcation between married and single congregants.

Currently, not many high school students and youth are successfully making the transition to the young adult ministry. This too is a common issue. At 18/19 years old, recent high school graduates no longer feel the draw to youth ministries that include much younger teen students. However, the ability to integrate themselves into a more mature group of young adults is an intimidating prospect.

Older teen girls may feel like prey, and older teen boys, who tend to mature more slowly than their female peers, may feel lost in the social sea of young adults. It takes intentional efforts to integrate the graduating youth into a young adult ministry. However, a ministry that struggles to find new leaders and solid members, is often focused on maintaining the ministry for the core and will often not have the resources to reach into its fringes, which would include the incoming youth.

Recently a younger member joined the leadership team and that has encouraged the rest of the team. However, some of the leadership and members are now in their 30s. This will necessitate some leadership introspection about the future of *The Well*.

Vision

From the beginning, Pastors Chris and Mandy possessed a love and compassion for young adults. Their hearts longed to reach their peers with a real and relevant gospel message. Not only did they desire to be good role models and mentors, but they sought the same for themselves. They found this in Pastor Brennan and Evangel Church.

The larger church offered solid support for the idea and birth of *The Well*. They were given permission to be creative. They were given financial resources and the facility to build and grow this ministry. They were provided solid prayer support, trust, and experienced coaching as *The Well* developed its foundation and footing. Importantly, this experiment and its young leaders were given permission to fail.

From its earliest days, the leadership team operated with full cooperation and support from the larger church body. This is a common thread in successful young adult ministries. Support from the church and denomination is integral to the birth and maturation of the ministry.

Early in the development of *The Well* came the vision of satiating thirst - not just spiritual, but physical thirst. This idea inspires the worship experiences and the mission outreach—as witness wells for Africa and college care packages to meet physical as well as emotional needs of displaced college students. This compassion is a driving force in the pastoral team and lived out through the leadership and servants within the congregation.

Changes

Over time *The Well*, like many ministries, has sought balance between substance and image. Knowing that churches are often evaluated based on numbers, and knowing that sufficient numbers of people bring with them the financial resources to sustain and grow the church, it was important to provide a significantly attractive worship experience and program.

On the other hand, it is the substance of the Gospel that provides the health and vitality of all churches. While most older, traditional church models focus on substance and

stability, young adult congregations don't have this luxury. Young adults, especially those looking to leave the outmoded services of their childhood churches, are looking for a congregation that more closely reflects their tastes and culture.

Church leaders who seek to provide both solid biblical substance, along with new methods, face a challenge of balance with few patterns to follow. *The Well* has sometimes focused on the substance of the Gospel message, and at other times catered to the style and appearance that would draw people into the services and programs of the church.

Currently, the leadership team is moving towards more substance—with less concern about attendance numbers. While they understand this is the right approach, there is some hesitation to alienate their already fickle attendees. They understand that some young adults have a history of disillusionment with the Church. *The Well* may be a last chance for some to connect with a faith community and the leadership team understand they have to be careful.

Pastor Mandy paraphrased a text from Jeremiah that represented the leader's conviction. They know their approval must come from God, and not from the people. This is challenging when a group feels called to be culturally relevant. To meet people where they are, without compromising the message, is usually the driving purpose of most contemporary pastors.

To bring the gospel to the alienated, wounded, and broken people, in ways that speak to them and draw them to Christ, is the whole reason pastors have left traditional ministries. They see people who have lost hope in the traditional Church, but are still looking for God and a culturally relevant faith community. At the same time, pastors are loyal to their Church roots and are not anxious to leave all of that behind.

Those who do not bridge this gap successfully and find the balance point between substance and relevance will find themselves with either a dying ministry or unemployed. As of this writing, *The Well* and its leadership has successfully navigated this path. As they go through leadership transitions, it will be interesting to watch them in the future.

The leadership team knows their future success is not reliant on the lights, the music, and the cafe. From this point forward they will emphasize the substance of their preaching and teaching, without diminishing the technical quality of the service.

Challenges

The biggest challenge facing the ministry is in the transient nature of their target audience. The population changes depending on whether school is in session or on Summer break. It is also affected by the major vacation breaks that occur mid-semester in fall, winter, and spring.

Indeed, young adults and students are very non-committal and reluctant to attend institutionalized events and programs. The advent of the mobile web has only aggravated this issue. While some will still choose to congregate, web applications like Foursquare, Twitter, and Facebook has made it easier to assess, in real time, where their peers are gathering. Leaders are then left to plan activities which people may or may not choose to attend.

This is also a challenge facing the recruitment of volunteers and those needed for the successful administration of ministry projects. While a small percentage is faithful in attendance and participation, a larger percentage is much more fickle and harder to recruit. Solid commitments are rare in the younger generations. This is a challenge that all churches will soon face, but is primarily a young adult issue currently.

As mentioned earlier, due to the lower attendance numbers, *The Well* is not fully self-funded. They rely on financial and facility support from the larger church. While this is an import ministry of Evangel Church, in order for *The Well* to truly thrive, they will need to become more self-sufficient and seek greater growth and maturity.

Also mentioned earlier is the aging of the leadership team. Most church growth experts recognize that leaders attract people within 10 years of their own age. While this is not a hard and fast rule, it generally holds true. As the pastoral team enters their 30s, they will begin to attract older adults, also in their thirties and even older. Their ability to attract the 18-20 year old graduating youth will be hampered by this same progression of age. Many successful young adult ministries from the 1990s have ceased to be young adult congregations. The ministry itself has graduated in a full-fledged church that caters to younger suburban families - complete with children's programs and senior activities. *The Well* is rapidly approaching a time when this will be a real issue. Most ministries do not tackle this with intentionality, but tend to drift into these changes without much forethought.

Opportunities

Like many leaders of churches that want to be real and relevant, the leadership team at *The Well* does not want to measure their success in numbers or data. Instead they want their success to be assessed through the changed lives of people. Typically this is more difficult. Financial data, attendance records, and baptisms are easy to measure. Currently there is not a good measurement matrix for "changed lives."

Optimistically, the leadership of *The Well* is looking to their obedience to God's direction and leaving the success, or failure, in His hands. This is a tremendous opportunity, but few ministry teams have successfully navigated this path. Generally, what gets measured is where growth happens. This is the opportunity that faces not just *The Well* and Evangel Church, but all relevant ministries of the future. As we develop a matrix and significant benchmarks to measure discipleship, life change, and changed lives, we, as a Church, can better serve our people in more significant ways.

Lessons Learned

For congregation that wish to support a young adult ministry, or church planters who choose to focus on the young adult population, there are several lessons to be learned:

1. *Leadership is crucial.* Selecting leaders of character, integrity, calling, and purpose is essential. Leaders must have passion, compassion, and vision. Leaders must be persons of prayer with a solid biblical foundation. Leaders must be gifted and experienced in leading—in other words, they must be able to attract followers, collaborators, and teammates.

2. *Church support is essential.* Without the support of the denomination, overseers, ministry organization, or mother church, the ministry will not succeed. This support must be organic and not coerced. From the senior pastor/leader, through the board, and deep into the congregation/stakeholders, the support must be spiritual, philosophical, missional, and financial.

3. *Worship must be experiential and experimental.* As witnessed at *The Well*, the worship experience, as well as the coffee house ministry, is an experience that draws young adults looking for something real and relevant. Quality is important, but it must support the experience, not overshadow it. Indeed, the leadership needs permission to experiment, change, adapt, and enhance the whole of the ministry, as well as individual pieces.

4. *Vision and purpose must be clear and be clearly stated.* Many young adult and contemporary ministries begin out of rebellion and this is difficult DNA to outgrow. The ministry must be birthed from a vision and purpose to do something significant. Pastors Chris and Mandy have demonstrated this passion from an early age and it shows in the success and longevity of *The Well*.

5. *Outreach and service outside the church body must be included.* *The Well* has demonstrated local and global mission in ways that few small congregations do. Not only have they reached inward to build the local ministry, but they have reached outward to local college students and global mission projects. This enables the congregants to avoid a selfishness that often stifles personal and community growth.

6. *Love wins.* One thing that resonates strongly from the leadership of *The Well* is their love for others, love for God, and love for each other. This essential principle, lived out in a community of faith, is a powerful glue. It not only binds the leaders together, but attracts others who come within reach.

Conclusion

While most church leaders would like to downplay the place of personality when it comes to ministry success, it is difficult to ignore. When spirituality, personality, giftedness, and vision come together with the right mix, the ministry will often flourish.

When the ministry does not succeed, it is often easy to see how these qualities were not well mixed.

Sometimes a single individual will rise up and lead a successful ministry to unforeseen successes. Often it will be a team of individuals who cooperate with unique talents and gifts to birth a successful ministry. Other times, the leadership is so organic, that it is difficult to really ascertain the source of vision and the real work in its success.

When it comes to *The Well*, it is apparent, even from a distance, that Senior Pastor Kevin Brennan is a big part of the success of this young adult ministry. His vision, support, and enthusiasm are frequently mentioned by the current leader of the ministry. But that is not to in any way diminish the calling and giftedness of the Morantes. It is clear that their love for their peers is a significant component of *The Well*.

It is important to further research young adult ministries, the changing demographics of generational ministry, and the role played by more mature adult congregations. Style has to be real and relevant to the target population, but other than that, it isn't style that determines success. The granular mosaic of people, spiritual gifts, and teamwork are where we do not possess sufficient benchmarks for growth, success, discipleship, and mission. Without a better understanding of less tangible data, it will be difficult for church leaders to replicate successes like *The Well*.

The difficulty of providing a ministry to a target generation, like young adults, is that people continue to age and mature. Early on the creators of the ministry must decide if they are going to remain relevant to a certain age group, or if they will evolve and mature with their initial target group.

To use the business world as a model, there are stores which attempt to provide all things to all people, so-called "big box" stores, and others which cater to only one cohort, such as a store selling children's toys, or one selling clothing to "big and tall men." Full-service, traditional congregations, would like to be all things to all people. However, there may be groups within their congregations, such as youth and young adults, who feel they are often left with the leftovers. This leaves them unsatisfied and disillusioned. So young adult ministries start up, but they usually don't imagine staying with their first attendees and becoming a full-service church.

Because of the normal path transition from young adult ministry to full-service church, most young adult ministries that showed great success in the 1990s no longer exist as young adult congregations. It would be interesting to study those that made a successful transition and how that was accomplished.

It would also be fascinating to develop a survey of existing young adult congregations, whether they exist as a ministry, a church within a church, or as a stand-alone community of faith. Crucial to the survey would be to find common denominators, outliers, and common traits.

Some questions that should be included in a survey include: (1) Are the successful young adult congregations affiliated with a denomination or national para-church ministry organization? (2) Does the ministry have a growth plan? (3) Has the community developed a strategy to remain focused on young adults, or do they have a plan to mature into a church for young families? (4) What is the purpose and focus of the ministry? Is it spirituality, discipleship, worship, meeting social needs, mission-oriented, service-oriented or did it begin as a rebellion? (5) Were there significant phases within their history that provided opportunities or challenges that are common across the nation? This could be a measure of time, attendance, measurement, or programs—or all of the above.

Many would like to see holistic congregations that minister to all ages, all worship styles, all socioeconomic groups, and all races and ethnicities, but this is rarely possible. The fallback is that we cater to each of these groups individually. It is important to overcome the silos of isolation, impediments to outreach and service, and the financial obstacles. Indeed, even political and preferential issues can overshadow the needs of forgotten people groups, like young adults.

Further research into successes and failures will help church leaders know what is profitable to pursue, and what is not. Without significant data, all decisions are made based on preference and prejudice - both good and bad in their own ways.

One new trend that is rising in popularity is city-wide, ecumenical young adult gatherings. These gatherings are not full-service ministries, but they do provide the opportunity for quality generationally-targeted worship experiences that meet the needs and expectations of the target audience.

Whatever the path, there should be enough outcome-based data to determine what enables a young adult ministry to succeed or fail. The challenge will be to track down that data and talk to the people who were involved.

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