



Resurrected Lives: Relational Evangelism with Young Adults

by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook

A November 2009 issue of *The Week* featured a story, “Losing our religion,” that focused on the rapidly growing numbers of the religiously unaffiliated in the United States, the so called *Nones*, and asked if organized religion is fading. Younger than the general population, many Nones believe in God, yet are skeptical about organized religion. The article quotes recent statistics suggesting that if this trend continues, cohorts of nonreligious young people will replace older religious people and account for one-quarter of the American population. Another recent article in *USA Today* concluded that young adults born in the 1980s and 1990s, approximately 72 million people, want to make an impact and are socially-conscious yet do not relate to traditional institutional structures. A decreasing number of these young adults view churches as places to make a difference or to develop their leadership skills.²

The fact that nearly every major denomination is aging and losing members has been a concern for the last thirty years, yet institutional efforts to reverse these trends and to capture the religious imagination of young adults have been limited. Moreover, mainline denominations, historically and culturally self-conscious about evangelism, are further challenged to proclaim the good news in today’s religiously pluralistic nation and world. What then is the role of evangelism with young adults today? What are some of the ways that the Christian church can better respond to the spiritual questions of young adults in a religiously pluralistic age? How might congregations better respond to the gifts and skills young adults have to offer?

“One of the reasons many churches don’t do evangelism well is that their motivation is self-serving,” says Tom Brackett, church planting specialist for the Episcopal Church. “Long before we announce the good news, God is at work among the people.” Brackett believes that a focus on evangelism primarily as a church growth strategy is counterproductive, especially with young adults, and at a time when the world is longing for evidence that God is with us. A more positive approach to evangelism for many, he suggests, lies “in pointing out the ways that God is already active, transforming lives, and connecting us to each other.”

David Gortner, professor of evangelism and congregational leadership at Virginia Theological Seminary, writes in his book *Transforming Evangelism* that for evangelism to be effective today it must go deeper than top-down institutional solutions and traditional programs. Rather, Gortner argues that evangelism is a spiritual practice based in gratitude, combined with a new way of seeing and hearing God’s presence in others. “Evangelism is a willful, joyful spiritual discipline of seeing and naming the Holy Spirit at work in ourselves and those we encounter—giving voice to our own grace-filled experiences, and helping others find their voice.”

One judicatory that is intentionally reaching out to young adults is the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. In 2008, the diocese initiated the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project, a ministry designed to find out what young adults ages 18-30 value deeply, how they experience their faith journeys, and their perspectives on faith, spirituality, and the church. The project defines relational evangelism as “a life-long spiritual practice that is the ministry of *all* to recognize the power of God in Christ to transform our lives and communities, and then being willing to share those stories of God’s grace in others.” The project came about as a result of multiple gatherings around the Boston area of young

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adult clergy and others who were already engaged in young adult ministry. Arrington Chambliss, the director of the project, comes to it with a long history of engagement with young people through faith-based and community organizations. With a “passion for finding God in the stories of other people,” Chambliss is clear about the innovative and investigative dimensions of the work. “I’m excited to support young people in their ministry. It will help me take myself more seriously as a Christian and will also create an opportunity to learn together how we can lead resurrected lives, creating the kingdom of God here on earth.” Interested in young adult ministry that “truly listens first,” Chambliss says that the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project is about *engagement*, not *conversion*. “It is God who does the converting,” she says, “relational evangelism is about us having a deep enough relationship that others want to join with us.”

The Relational Evangelism Pilot Project is based in the virtues of Christian spirituality, simple living, and forming community. The project is also based in the belief that young adults generally relate more freely to individuals than to institutions and focuses on three interrelated groups: young adults who have no relationship to the institutional church, those who have a peripheral relationship with the church, and those already involved but who are seeking more support regarding their leadership role in the church. The project places young adult “evangelists” at sites around the diocese, including congregations and university chaplaincies. Each of the evangelists is hired to work for 20 hours per week for 1-2 years under the supervision of clergy who serve at the site. Their task is to build relationships with other young adults and to find out more about their academic, career, social, and spiritual needs. From there, the evangelists will build a leadership team of five young adults who will facilitate small group-based ministry and faith-based action projects. Sustainability of the project is based on the premise that a core group of young adult leaders will remain at each site after the original evangelist’s term of service is complete.

Chambliss hopes that the Relational Evangelism Pilot Project will provide young adults with the spiritual direction they need at crucial points in their lives. She also hopes that the project will not only enhance young adult ministry in congregations and chaplaincies, but will serve as a model for other judicatories and congregations interested in engaging a new generation. “Not only does evangelism mean sharing the good news of the gospel, but it also means sharing the good news of people’s lives and what we can do together in the world to demonstrate the power of our faith,” says Chambliss. “We are viewing evangelism as a spiritual practice emanating from our deep gratitude of God’s presence in our lives. It is my hope that the young adults involved in this ministry will see the good news in each other, find the community they are searching for, and embark on a spiritual path that will engage them more deeply with God, each other, and the world.”

Authentic community, rather than church attendance, is a key focus of relational evangelism and an important factor in the growth of intentional communities interested in *being* the church. For instance, The Restoration Project is an intentional, ecumenical community in Tucson, Arizona, founded largely by young adults around the values of hospitality, simple and sustainable living, playful spirituality, and peaceful, prophetic action. The community of The Restoration Project sponsors an open meal once a week, keeps a room open for hospitality, works in solidarity with those on the margins, throws parties, and lavishly invites people into their home and their lives. Carol Bradsen, a co-founder of the community, admits to a lot of aversion to the term “evangelism” when it is used to turn Christianity into a product and evangelism as a way to sell it. “To me, following Jesus is about being,” says Bradsen. “It’s about being part of the family of God and the new way of living that naturally unfolds from this. It’s about being a good neighbor. It’s about inviting people to be part of community and to share in the joy of abundant life that comes from living with kingdom values.”

Another of The Restoration Project community’s co-founders, Kate Bradsen, notes that the group has no church growth “marketing strategy.” Rather, “we believe if we take care of the depth of our ministry, spiritual lives and relationships that God will take care of the breadth of our ministry.” “It’s not about making new believers, but about creating the kingdom,” says Gretchen Larson-Wolbrink, also a founding member of The Restoration Project community. For example, Carol Bradsen shares the story of a neighborhood potluck sponsored by the community. Some of the visitors saw the invitation on the

neighborhood list-serve and invited friends to come as well. Many were young adults and wanted to know more about this group and what it was doing in the community. “We did not throw that party so people would ask these questions. That wasn’t our motivation,” she says. “We threw a backyard potluck because that’s the kind of thing we like to do. Jesus went to a lot of parties, so we are in good company there. I believe that a good dinner party can be a sign that the kingdom is among us—it’s a place where all are welcome and there is enough for everyone. The thing is, that night we experienced abundant life together.”

Beyond individual and community-based approaches with young adults, the Internet and, more recently, social media provide powerful tools to support relational evangelism. Thom Chu, a faith-based organizational developer specializing in generational studies, recently completed a one-year project with the United Church of Christ researching a comprehensive mission strategy for the denomination’s work with youth and young adults. Chu is also a faculty member of the United Church of Christ’s Web University, focusing on reaching young adults through the Internet. Through face-to-face meetings and internet surveys, Chu found that the single most popular venue for relational evangelism with young adults is on the internet, specifically through social media, such as Facebook. According to Chu, Facebook is the second or third most frequented website in the United States today and an important evangelistic tool capable of an incredibly broad reach of constituents with the added capacity to explore deep topics. Chu’s approach relies on young people’s individual friend requests (as an adult he never solicits Facebook friendships with minors or anyone he is serving in ministry), and over the course of two years he has accumulated nearly 1,000 friends. Every day on his virtual visitation schedule, Chu posts inspirational birthday greetings, puts a thumbs-up on photos, and views video clips of mutual concern in a manner he considers “the spiritual practice of benediction.” Through the medium of Facebook, Thom Chu believes he is able “to combine enthusiasm (remember its etymology of ‘God in us’), hospitality, celebration and joy, creativity and curiosity, and compassion and justice-making in short messages reaching through the ether.” Some of his most effective communications through Facebook are not necessarily with young adults who regularly attend church, or even who identify as Christians, but with those who are drawn to the depth of thought and meaning of spiritual teachers that they read in various posts. Some of Chu’s Facebook contacts have also resulted in visits to local congregations.

Nancy Davidge, a marketing communications consultant based in Marblehead, Massachusetts with a specialty in helping religious organizations and other nonprofits use social media, suggests that the good news has always been spread by the social media of the time. Today, many congregations have at their disposal a variety of accessible and inexpensive communications tools to help them build community through relational evangelism. Yet Davidge notes that while many congregations use tools such as email, websites, Facebook, blogs, and Twitter, they may still be missing an opportunity to build a long term relationship with people. “It is important that churches think strategically about how to electronically engage new members who join the community, to identify their interests, and to build relationship by sharing the congregation’s mission and offering ways for a newcomer to become involved,” says Davidge. “While the media may have changed, the importance of telling your story in ways that engage and invite remains the same.”

Thom Chu’s research on youth and young adults affirms the importance of intentionally building community through social media in such a way that enables users to read the depth of the message “amid the morass of multiple messages.” In this way, he defines relational evangelism as “the task and the gift of persistently acknowledging and attending to God’s presence in daily environments.” Individuals model this by demonstrating authenticity and vulnerability within a public framework, such as Facebook, that for Chu includes “care of creation, compassion for others, and self-care.” He sees the role of relational evangelism in a religiously pluralistic age as one that respects other living faiths, but at the same time shares Christ’s story and encourages others to engage with it and their own story. “I consider myself an evangelist as part of a complete being responding to a God who made me, and I can’t resist the opportunity to share something this wonderful with others. I express this in many forms, tapping into spiritual practices ancient and modern, and do this in a persistent (not insistent), iterative way, incarnating a Christ who

always shows up in the right place at the right time.”

Miguelina Espinal, a young adult and the priest-in-charge of the Church of the Epiphany in Orange, New Jersey, echoes the importance of showing up in the right place at the right time in relational evangelism with young adults. “Relational evangelism is what Jesus did: eat, drink, laugh, and share with his followers,” she says. Emily Anna Perow, missionary for youth and young adults in the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut, believes that who she is today is largely due to her experiences of relational evangelism. “I am who God has called me to be because others have listened to my story and shared their stories and share the gospel.” She believes that the “relational” in relational evangelism with young adults refers to the amount of time it takes to really listen to and get to know someone. “Jesus travelled the countryside sharing his story and relationship with his father and most importantly he truly listened to others and heard their doubts, concerns, fears, and joys. We must give others that same opportunity.”

Lastly, relational evangelism is crucial in an age of religious pluralism. Rather than deny religious difference, relational evangelism equips young adults to be secure enough in talking about their own faith to engage actively and authentically in interreligious dialogue and community action for the common good. “Evangelism is about proclaiming God’s love for the ‘other,’” says Lisa Kimball, professor of Christian formation and congregational leadership at Virginia Theological Seminary, “It is not about keeping score of who is saved and who isn’t.” In fact, the spirit of mutuality and intentional listening characteristic of relational evangelism opens up the follower of Jesus to God’s love in a way that seeks deeper relationship with all of creation, and responds to the suffering of the world. In a religiously pluralistic world, relational evangelism contributes to the creation of healthy environments in which young adults listen to God at work in their lives and discern ways their gifts can contribute to the reign of God for all humankind.

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NOTES

- 1 “Losing our religion,” *The Week*, November 6, 2009, p. 13.
- 2 “Generation Y Gets Involved,” *USA Today* (October 23, 2006).
- 3 David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), p. 32.

Evangelism in the Twenty First Century...

1. Evangelism is a spiritual practice
2. Evangelism is the work of every generation.
3. Evangelism is based in a deinstitutionalized approach.
4. Evangelism is the work of individuals first (not programs or institutions).
5. Evangelism is based in the assumption that God is already present and active.
6. Evangelism is often found in community, and transforms our communities and personal lives....

Adapted from the work of David Gortner in *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008) 29.

Relational Evangelism as a Spiritual Practice involves...

1. Waking up to your life with all your senses attuned and your heart and mind ready to respond to the encounter of God's loving work in your life and in the world;
2. Listening to hear the stories of transformation and learning to draw them out;
3. Telling your story to recognize the transformation in your own life;
4. Inviting people to join in God's dream for their lives and our communities based on their passions and interests;

Adapted from the Relational Evangelism Pilot project of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

Discussion Questions

1. 1. Reflect on your own faith journey. What are some of your own experiences of evangelism and how do they impact how you feel about evangelism today? If possible, compare and contrast both positive and challenging experiences.
2. 2. The article refers to evangelism as a spiritual practice. How do you experience evangelism as spiritual practice? How might a sense of evangelism as a spiritual practice open up new perspectives for you?
3. 3. As you reflect on your own adulthood, how did you experience the church? In what ways was the church present to your daily life? In what ways was the church irrelevant or challenging?
4. 4. How are young adults present in the life of your congregation? In what ways are their gifts and leadership recognized and affirmed?
5. 5. If evangelism is at first the work of individuals, what are some ways you are or might become a relational evangelist? What are some ways that relational evangelism might more fully become part of the life of your congregation?

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