

Looking Forward: Theological Education, Young Adults, and the 21st-Century Church

by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook

Many young clergy believe they have something valuable to offer the church, in particular, insights into what is needed to attract young people to the church, to support them once they are there, and to support those who are ultimately called to the ministry. Based on extensive conversations I've had with many of these young ministers, I'd say they are right. The question for the church, then, is whether or not it will listen to what these young men and women have to say.

“There is real wisdom for the church from those on the margins,” says Stephanie, 34, a recently ordained minister and seminary graduate. “As someone who feels that it is a joy to be a young adult and ordained, I feel that I have something unique to offer the church in this day and age.” After a long ordination process, and several years of seminary, Stephanie felt ready to reflect on her experience as a young adult in seminary. “I find myself always looking forward,” she said. “I wonder, how—or when—are we going to adapt to what is going on in people’s lives and the world? How can seminaries prepare people to ‘do church’ in different ways? When will the institution begin to receive wisdom from those of us on the margins?”

Stephanie’s questions are remarkably similar to those I have heard from over 100 young adults in the last three years. This study, “Theological Education and Young Adults: A Study of Seminary Life,” offers a glimpse of the realities of mainline ministry students under the age of 35.¹ Though books and articles abound on generational studies and the impact of generational differences in business and politics, relatively few sources look at the intersection between young adults called to ministry and the realities of the theological institutions designed to educate them. This article is an attempt to outline some of the major themes found in the interviews with young adults, and offers their advice to us “Baby Boomers” and older folks who largely control the agenda of theological education today.

A Time of Change, Challenge, and Opportunity

At the beginning of the last century, the ecumenical movement called for “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”² As we stand at the beginning of the 21st century, it appears that our forebears failed to meet this goal, and we are left wondering what to do next. For those in their twenties and thirties, the century ahead is likely to be filled with stark realities not even considered a century ago, presenting new and difficult challenges for the church. The Christian hegemony of our ancestors is now called into

question, and a greater degree of religious pluralism is now increasingly the norm. From the perspective of shrinking mainline denominations, we need to begin to ask ourselves if we are prepared to go beyond merely replacing our decreasing numbers to transform the church to preach the gospel in a new age. “Lots of young adults are looking for deep commitment and a place of deep transformation,” said Stephanie. “But it is not clear if the church of our parents’ generation is willing to recreate that kind of community. I am not talking about faddism, or chasing folks, but we need to serve and welcome young adults, too.”

Lately, writers on religion and culture have extensively examined the impact of postmodernism on the church. Simply put, our society is in the throes of a major transition, or the movement from modernism to postmodernism. Postmodernism is characterized by the breakdown in the order of established institutions, including the church, as well as other cultural and scientific traditions. For young adults, this transition means that their world is constantly changing, their internal life is often fragmented, and perhaps the most sobering reality is that they have adjusted to life in a state of chaos. As they confront their own downward mobility, they are critical of the competitive lifestyles and conspicuous consumption of those in the generations before them. Experience has taught them the fragility of the human condition and the need for greater cooperation if we are going to survive on the planet. Yet it is also these yearnings of the young adult heart that speak to the emergent church today. “There is every reason to believe that postmodernism is calling forth new ways of reading Scriptures and the Christian tradition that expose vitality in the unlikeliest places,” writes Andy Crouch. “Why should we not hope that our generation, prompted by the new challenges of postmodernism, will discover new depths and previously uncharted territory in the gospel?”³

Though young adults may feel that they are on the margins of our theological institutions, they also stand at the intersection between the sacred and secular, between inherited traditions and the needs of the future. “When I came to the church I was desperate to find some ‘truth’ to hold onto,” said Clive, 28. “After a while I began to think of my church as a community where authenticity and hospitality are practiced. My call evolved out of my explorations there.” Bill, 26, resisted what he interpreted as the “doctrinal rigidity” of his childhood, yet found himself called to be a leader in a congregation that is re-evaluating its mission. “I think it is more honest for us to see the flexible side of institutional life, rather than [viewing it as] fixed and constant and unchanging. I am fed in [congregations] that are creative and trying to do new things.”

Congregational Support Matters

If local congregations more closely reflected the demography of their surrounding areas, they would have many more young adult members than they do now. Most young adults in the survey saw the congregation as the primary place where they gained access to theological education and received encouragement to pursue their vocations to ordained ministry. Similarly, it was adult education in congregations, through preaching, classes, Bible study, forums, retreats, and seminars, where these same young adults first claimed to hear the gospel anew. “I never thought I would end up ordained and working in a parish,” said Sally, 27. “I was active in high school, but then didn’t go to church for several years after that until a friend invited me to worship at his church. The people there didn’t just tolerate me, they really welcomed me, cared if I was there, and invited me to become a part of their ministry. That kind of unconditional welcome was hard to

ignore.”

“I was invisible for a long time,” said Amy, 26, in reference to the congregation she joined after college. “A community of support would have been very helpful.” Amy remembers eventually receiving the support of her congregation to attend seminary, but, she says, “It took a long time for them to see that I was really there, even though I was very active in the parish.” Statistics indicate that, while many people make faith commitments in their teenage and young adult years, they do not automatically return to the church once they have left “unless room is made for them and invitation extended in that period between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine when the urge to commitment comes.”⁴

Change Overtakes Seminaries

To be sure, the reality of today’s congregations is shifting, as is the gap, some believe, between how future ministers are trained and the demands of diverse local contexts. Many seminaries struggle to continue traditional three-year residential programs despite rising costs and the inability of increasing numbers of potential students to afford that model of education. Though seminaries remain committed to the education of ministers who, as one young adult suggested, “might truly represent the whole people of God,” the exact shape formation and training should take for the 21st-century church remains somewhat elusive. At the same time, the student bodies of theological schools are changing, and along with them the nature of community life. Race and ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual identity are critical forms of diversity on many seminary campuses. Age and generational differences are other forms of diversity that impact both the mission and the delivery of seminary education.

“Take Us Seriously”

In almost all denominations, fewer than seven percent of the clergy are under the age of 35. For example, in the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the average age of candidates for ordination is 39. According to another recent survey, about 61 percent of United Methodist Church members are 50 years of age or older. Moreover, with the projected rise in clergy retirements in the next decades, denominations are anticipating serious clergy shortages. While the number of middle-age, second-career students in theological education continues to grow, so too does the presence of students in their twenties and thirties where there are efforts to recruit young adults. Interestingly, until the late 1960s, campus ministries and church-related camps played an important role in retaining and identifying young adult leaders for the church, many to ordained ministry. More recently, however, it was commonplace for young adults to be urged to wait to go to seminary until they were older. Many young people who were refused an opportunity to have their vocation taken seriously found other ways to live out their vocations.⁵

It is not uncommon today to hear denominational leaders ask, “How do we recruit young clergy?” when a previous question should be, “How can the church be more responsive to young adults?” The shift toward lifelong learning communities is perhaps key to changing the mentality that sees replacement clergy as the goal, rather than nurturing young adults called to faithful ministry in the world, including, in some cases, ordination. Theological educators differ about whether the proclamation of the gospel should be

explicit or implicit. Regardless of this difference, however, it can be said that the most responsive religious institutions to young people are those who take seriously their lives, their culture, and their concerns.

“I knew it would be hard in seminary,” said Jennifer, 23, “but I am glad that I found some friends to talk to about what seminary is like.” Like others in her age group in theological education, Jennifer is the youngest person in most of her classes and, at times, feels she is the subject of “parentalism” from other classmates. “I know that I am younger than some other students’ children, but I am not their child,” said Jennifer. “I am learning to know myself so well, even with difficulty, and realizing I can keep a sense of integrity,” she said. Like other students in her age group, Jennifer feels that more intentional support for young adults as a group would help her feel more at home in seminary. Similarly, most other young adults surveyed articulated the need for hospitable space to socialize with other young adults in their schools and congregations.

Cathy, 24, and Jan, 25, both final year students at an urban seminary, spoke to the need to practice firm boundaries as a young adult seminarian. “Some of the churches I have worked in would run me into the ground if I didn’t learn to say ‘no,’” said Cathy. Jan also spoke of the feeling of “never being completely in one place,” as she balanced her commuting schedule, a part-time church job, and classes, along with her relationships. Kate, 23, echoed the concerns of many single young adults who face the challenges of dating and relationships while in seminary and newly ordained. “I really struggle with life in the fishbowl,” she said. “I don’t want to be single all my life, but I have to struggle now with how I am supposed to live and act in the world as a single pastor.” Kate suggests that, as part of the seminary curriculum, frank discussions, without condescension, on such topics as clergy relationships, sexual ethics, and healthy boundaries would be helpful to young clergy in their twenties and thirties.

Debt and Deployment Worry the Called

Another large area of concern to young adults in theological education is the area of finances and deployment. Young adults, like theological students in other age groups, are increasingly concerned with educational debt and its impact on ministry. Over half the students included in this survey voiced concern about the amount of their educational debt, especially if debt for theological education is in addition to recent undergraduate debt. “I accepted that my first job won’t be my dream job,” said Ann, 26, “but I am concerned that I will only be able to work in affluent communities so I can repay my loans.”⁶ Other young adults are concerned about the impact of decreasing numbers of entry-level clergy jobs on their possibilities for employment. Those who do find good positions after seminary, like Rob, 28, still have to learn how to balance the power dynamics in the congregation. “I like the people here,” said Rob, “but my age can be a disadvantage when I am the only one under 30 in a meeting or at church. I am not the church mascot. For instance, just because I am young doesn’t mean I want to do youth ministry. I feel I don’t always have the same range of choices as other clergy.”

Worship, Music, and Generational Conflict

Two related areas of frequent generational conflict in theological education and within congregations are worship and music. One of the reasons why meaningful worship is so important to young adults today is that it is both a sign of community transformation and

a vehicle for their own transformation. Young adults are seeking a connection with the rites of community. Under the best circumstances, the church is called to pass along our ancient heritage and traditions to young adults, while at the same time remaining open to their influences and the message of the gospel in our own age. Problems arise when seminaries and congregations detach liturgy from Christian mission and social action, resulting in what is perceived by many young adults as empty ritual and formalism. Who can take seriously a God who is detached from the suffering of the world? Liturgy that responds to young adults opens up the liturgical assembly to be more than spectators. Worship is offered not out of obligation but out of one's inner life and calling to a greater sense of engagement with the world.

Role Models Wanted

Though at times frustrated by older classmates and colleagues, the young adults surveyed all spoke to the need for positive role models and mentors as key to their formation. Many young adults are painfully aware that they want something more from older adults in the church. They are seeking opportunities to make a personal commitment. They are engaged in establishing their adult identities. Their searching springs from key existential questions confronting all humankind: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? What will happen after I die? Young adults yearn for communities with integrity, places where they can be their authentic selves. In a sense, young adults call religious institutions into account. They would like our communities to be better, to be places where a commitment to freedom, mutual direction, collaboration, creativity, and action are the norm. It is the work of spiritual formation to help young adults see themselves as the protagonists of their own lives, claim their personal and collective faith stories in the present and in the future, and then learn to recognize the movement of the Spirit in their lives and the lives of others.

A Call for Conversion

What does this analysis tell us about theological education and young adults? It suggests the need for a major transformation—a conversion of sorts—in the way we carry out our mission and ministry. I use the word conversion deliberately, for in a basic sense it refers to a change from one lifestyle to another. Conversion requires an abandonment of an unsatisfying perspective in favor of a renewed and more meaningful life. While we have currently enrolled some young adults in theological education, indications are that we are a long way from creating faith communities where they feel valued for who they are, even if that identity may threaten institutional life as we know it. For the church to be converted to forms of theological education that respond to the vocational journeys of young adults, we will need to meet the challenges of authentic community—community that practices a stewardship of care, honors the politics of diversity and inclusion, and reverences mystery with a profound sense of servant ministry. We will need to look beyond institutional boundaries to young adults in remote places that are separated from one another, to become for them a sustaining image of life in Christ. We owe it to the church to pass along her riches to the next generations of religious leaders, and we owe it to young adults to enable them to become active participants in bringing forth the reign of God. Hopefully the church of the 21st century will be one where young adults are called to minister and flourish in a community based in ancient traditions and steeped in innovative expressions of the gospel of Christ.

Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways are young adults part of your church community? In what areas of your corporate life are young adults conspicuously absent? What changes and commitments would your church community need to make in order to more fully recognize the gifts, skills, needs, and talents of young adults?
2. Take a few moments to reflect on your own experience as a young adult: What issues were of most concern to you during that time of your life? What was your church experience during those years? What are some concrete ways that church and seminary can support young adults in their vocations?
3. Spiritual formation takes place within communities, and is not just an individual occupation. How might theological education respond more directly to the needs and concerns of young adults? How might congregations become mentoring communities?

Ways to Welcome Young Adults in Congregations

- Cultivate a genuine sense of relationship and belonging between members of all ages. Don't simply rely on young adults to welcome other young adults.
- Be open to a variety of musical and worship styles. Some young adults are drawn to the experience that traditional liturgies have to offer, while others respond to bold experimentation and "alternative" services. One size does not fit all.
- Walk the talk. Many young adults are skeptical about institutional religion and are wired to pick up any disconnect between religious rhetoric and interpersonal behavior. Authenticity matters.
- Offer young adults opportunities to exercise leadership. Church can be an important mentoring community for young leaders.
- Forget "but we have always done it that way!" Young adults tend to become alienated by bureaucracy in institutions. Genuine welcome includes a commitment to respond to the ideas of young adults and their ways of getting things done.
- Respond to the local community. Young adults seek out religious institutions with a demonstrated interest in addressing the issues of those in need.
- Schedule events and programs at times that will work for young adult schedules. Are the programs welcoming to students? Singles? Families with young children?
- Develop a first-rate Web site and other online technologies. Many young adults first enter religious institutions through the Web site. If the site is hard to navigate, unattractive, or not updated, they will be less likely to visit in person.
- Offer a fresh understanding of age-old biblical truths in light of contemporary life through programs that stress spiritual growth, small group dialogue, and social action.

Ten Tips for Supporting the Formation of Young Adults' Vocations

Although the factors listed below can relate to students in a variety of age groups, they prove to be of particular importance for seminaries and theological schools interested in the formation of young adult vocations.

- Create an inclusive community—a center of belonging—based in an ethic of hospitality and dialogue that bridges generational differences and nurtures the gifts of all ages.
- Be willing to work more collaboratively and share ministry across generations, with the realization that no generation possesses all truth.
- Foster a mentoring environment that challenges, supports, and inspires young adults to form healthy and committed professional and personal lives.
- Cultivate interdependence and critical thinking. Young adults comfortable with juggling multiple perspectives and working interdependently are better equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st-century church than are those who are affirmed for their ability to conform or who develop a narrow expertise.
- Provide a balance between reflection and action. Young adults need periods of reflection and renewal in balance with work and activism. Healthy modeling of this balance feeds healthy professional development.
- Adopt an attitude suggesting that change and conflict are healthy, along with the ability to discuss controversial issues.
- Promote a sense of vocation as process rather than as event. Many young adults are hungry for a faith community where they can practice meaningful discernment and receive confirmation on the meaning of God's work within their lives, beyond the confines of a particular job or location.
- Serve the whole person. Young adults thrive on periods of rigorous intellectual and spiritual engagement as well as periods of rigorous social activity and recreation. The academic agenda of the seminary or school should be tempered with ample opportunities for social activities, recreation, and fun.
- Work to address the financial realities of theological education. Increased financial aid and student loan structures that make graduate theological education more affordable are critical. There is a comparable need to strengthen alumni networks and placement services to provide young adults with greater access to employment opportunities.
- Provide renewed support for ministries across the church with young adults as integral to leadership development, including those young adults traditionally considered beyond the reach of institutional boundaries.

NOTES

1. This study was funded, in part, through the Episcopal Evangelical Education Society. As of January 2006, 104 young adults, ages 22 to 35, responded through interviews and written questionnaires. All participants in the study are members of mainline Protestant denominations, representing 15 seminaries in different regions of the United States.
2. David Devadas, *Ecumenism and Youth* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995), 1–2.
3. Andy Crouch, “Life after Postmodernism,” in *The Church in Emerging Culture*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 92–93.
4. Sam Portaro, “The Task Force on Campus Ministry: A Response,” in *Task Force on Campus Ministry* (Chicago: Diocese of Chicago, 1990), 3.
5. Statistics from the Pastoral Leadership Search Effort (www.theplse.org); the Board for Theological Education of the Episcopal Church; and “Millennium Study,” Evangelical Lutheran Church.
6. See Anthony Ruger, et al., *The Gathering Storm: The Educational Debt of Theological Students* (New York: Auburn Theological Seminary, 2005).

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