

## **Congregational Engagement of Young Adults: A Review of the Literature**

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For the majority of 18 to 29 year olds, organized religion could be described as “mostly harmless.” Relatively few young adults are hostile toward religion, but one-third are religiously unaffiliated (Lugo 2012), and over half describe church as irrelevant (Smith 2009). “Mostly harmless” are the words Douglas Adams’ novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* used to describe the planet Earth shortly before it was slated for demolition to make way for an intergalactic highway.

Despite these statistics, the demise of congregational life as the U.S. has known it is in no way imminent. About one-third of US churchgoers attend a congregation where 35 percent or more of regularly participating adults are under 35 (Wuthnow 2007). What is it about these congregations that draws young adults? What might other congregations do to become relevant to the spiritually open but religiously indifferent?

To answer these questions, I will review recent studies of “vital congregations” that have strong participation of younger adults (Wuthnow 2007). I begin by describing the place of religion in the changing life worlds of those in their late teens to mid-thirties. Next, I briefly describe the current landscape of young adult religious participation in the United States. After providing these contexts, I will turn to ethnographic case studies of successful congregations.

Historian Diane Winston calls the “gold standard for organized religion” an encounter participants experience as authentic, accessible, and animating (2007, p 266). I argue that four practices are key to crafting such an encounter for young adults: articulating a core *identity*; *inclusion* of people with diverse religious and social backgrounds; worship and mentors that *inspire* participants to strive to be better people; and the flexibility and drive to *innovate*. Across religious traditions, geographic settings, and theological commitments, vital congregations embody these four themes in ways that respond to the uncertainty and promise that mark young adult lives.

### **Religion and the Life Worlds of Younger Adults**

The paths people take from adolescence to adulthood are longer and more varied than ever before. In the United States, young adults marry and have children at later ages, pursue higher education at greater rates, and change jobs and residences frequently. They have unprecedented access to information about cultures and traditions that are not their own. Tolerance, diversity, and pluralism are values instilled by socializing institutions (such as families, schools, churches, and the media). The edited volume *On the Frontier of Adulthood* (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005) is a thorough academic introduction to these trends.

These changing life worlds shape young adults' religious beliefs and practices; in turn, religion can shape the ways young adults navigate their social landscapes. Below, I list several helpful concepts researchers have proposed for understanding how young adults' religious participation and changing life worlds influence one another.

**“Religion Among the Millennials”** is a 2010 report from the Pew Research Center. It documents the religious beliefs and practices of the “Millennial” generation (born roughly between 1981 and 1992). It also compares the practices of these 18-29-year-olds [at the time of this writing] to earlier generations' behaviors. Millennials are significantly less likely to affiliate with a congregation or attend worship services than previous generations did at ages 18-29. On the other hand, Millennials report many traditional beliefs (such as belief in heaven) and practices (such as frequent prayer). There is also great diversity within the generation.

Researchers compare birth cohorts based on the belief that shared experiences during formative years make people within a birth cohort (“Baby Boomers” or “Millennials”) similar to one another and different from those born before or after. A generational approach can be useful for highlighting differences across cohorts, but it can sometimes mask important differences in life experiences within birth cohorts. Moreover, studies often investigate a generation *during* its younger adult years, making it difficult to distinguish between the durable characteristics that will follow that generation over time, and effects of lifecycle stages. Researchers or church leaders hoping to apply generational theories must pay careful attention to such distinctions.

**Emerging Adulthood** is a term introduced by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett. He argues that sweeping social changes have ushered in a new developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood. This period of “emerging adulthood” is characterized by intense self-focus and identity exploration; instability; a feeling of being “in between”; and hope in the possibilities the future holds (Arnett 2004).

In her book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Sharon Daloz Parks frames the primary developmental task of young adulthood as learning how to ask big enough questions and to cultivate dreams that are not simply ambitious but worthwhile. She outlines a praxis of mentoring aimed to draw out these worthy dreams and suggests congregations may be one place where such mentoring relationships can thrive. Her theory of young adult faith development suggests the extreme cultural relativism many young adults express is a functional but typically temporary phase in the process of becoming a self-actualized adult.

**Moralistic Therapeutic Deism** describes the vast majority of 18-23-year-olds' religious beliefs, regardless of religious tradition. According to sociologist Christian Smith, the basic tenets of moralistic therapeutic deism include belief that: (1) God created and watches over the world. (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to one another. (3) The main goal in life is to be happy. (4) God does not need to be involved in one's

life other than to resolve problems. (5) Good people go to heaven when they die (Smith and Denton 2005).

Smith and colleagues developed the concept of moralistic therapeutic deism to describe the religious beliefs of teens aged 13-17. In a second wave of research, they found these same teens continued to espouse moralistic therapeutic deism at ages 18-23. In fact, contrary to popular imagination, Smith and colleagues found young adult religiosity is strongly continuous with youth experiences. Young adults' relationships with parents and other engaged adults as teens are important predictors of their religious beliefs and practices as emerging adults (Smith 2009).

This study also finds the majority of 18-23-year-olds see congregations as places that teach right from wrong. Smith argues that most young adults feel confident they know right from wrong; they also tend to believe each individual has his or her own standards of right and wrong. This relativism explains, at least in part, why some appreciate what churches have to offer but most feel little need to explore questions of meaning or purpose in the context of a faith community. Smith does not clarify whether he believes this relativism is tied to a lifecycle stage (as Daloz-Parks argues) or a durable characteristic of the current generation of young adults.

**Spiritual Tinkering** describes a way of making meaning out of diverse ideas, symbols, and practices. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers* (2007) suggests *tinkering* is a helpful metaphor for describing the religious orientations of younger adults, which he broadly defines as 18-44-year-olds. Tinkerers improvise with the resources at hand, making a life out of diverse, sometimes inconsistent, elements: orthodox and heterodox beliefs, Western and Eastern practices, Christian exceptionalism and religious tolerance.

Tinkering is not a stage of faith formation but rather a pervasive orientation toward meaning-making which is particularly well adapted to a mobile, unpredictable, and diverse society. People of all ages tinker; however, Wuthnow argues that younger adults are especially adept tinkerers. They are experiencing an unstable stage of the lifecycle, and they have grown up in an era of rapidly expanding access to information and significant uncertainty about economic and social futures.

**Faith Typologies** capture the diversity of young adult religiosity by sorting young adults into categories. Christian Smith's *Souls in Transition* identifies six types of young adult orientations to religion: the committed traditionalists (15 percent), selective adherents (30 percent) the spiritually open (15 percent), the religiously indifferent (25 percent), the religiously disconnected (5 percent), and the irreligious (10 percent). Other typologies exist within particular faith traditions. Flory and Miller (2008) describe four kinds of religiously active Christian young adults: innovators, appropriators, resisters, and reclaimers. Hayes (2007) lists seven ways Catholic young engage religion. Ukeles, Miller, and Beck (2006) see four major "life status" categories of Jewish young adults: the Orthodox, those married with children, those unmarried or married without children, and those who are married to someone who is not also Jewish.

The existence of so many ways to categorize young adult faith points to the incredible diversity within the current generation of young adults. However, to date, few typologies have been adopted or tested in subsequent research. Until they are, their reliability and validity as measures of meaningful intra-generational difference are uncertain.

### **Young Adult Religious Participation: An Overview**

Despite an increase in non-affiliation, private religious beliefs and practices have generally high salience for younger adults. The 2004 College Students' Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey found 80 percent of incoming first year students report an interest in spirituality, and 47 percent say it is "very important" or "essential" to seek out opportunities to grow spiritually (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2005). When NSYR researchers asked 18-23-year-olds if they had become more religious, less religious, or stayed about the same over the past two years, most reported staying the same (59 percent) or becoming *more* religious (24 percent) (Smith 2009). Since at least the 1970s, young adults' private forms of religiosity – such as daily prayer, belief in life after death, and belief in Biblical inerrancy – have largely held at steady rates. Wuthnow and Smith both caution against drawing too sharp a distinction between “private” spirituality and “public” religiosity, however. Young adults themselves may not delineate such practices as strongly as researchers do. Wuthnow finds a majority of 21-45-year-olds (55 percent) describe themselves as *both* spiritual and religious, while Smith argues that a majority of 18-23-year-olds may be open to spirituality but are simply not all that interested in *either* religion or spirituality as a regular practice.

When it comes to public or collective religious participation, church attendance is the most common measure of engagement. Smith reports 20 percent of 18-23-year-olds attend frequently (weekly or more), while 35 percent never attend. Attendance rates vary across religious groups. Higher-than-average rates of frequent attendance can be found among Mormon, Conservative Protestant, and Black Protestant young adults, while Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Jewish, and non-affiliated young adults all report lower than average rates of frequent attendance (Smith 2009).

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a modest decline in rates of regular (weekly or more) church attendance among young adults, from 19 percent to 15 percent of 18-25-year-olds, and from 31 percent to 25 percent of 21-45-year-olds (Smith 2009; Wuthnow 2007). Not all groups report declining attendance, however; among 18-25-year-olds, evangelical and black Protestants have seen slightly *increasing* rates of regular attendance, while Catholics and mainline Protestants' attendance rates have dropped (Smith 2009).

Wuthnow finds the two strongest predictors of church attendance among 21-45-year-olds are marital status and number of children; therefore, declining attendance rates (and differences in decline across denominations) can “almost entirely” be explained by changes in the timing of marriage and timing and number of children. Smith and Snell

corroborate that other demographic considerations, such as gender, educational attainment, and income, have little effect on the trajectory of declining attendance rates. These results diverge from earlier research that argued postsecondary education has a “liberalizing” effect on students’ orthodox religious beliefs. Mayrl and Uecker’s (2011) detailed analysis of NSYR data address this long-standing debate; they, too, find no evidence for a liberalizing effect of education on contemporary young adults.

That religious attendance is a matter of demographics rather than denominational differences is mixed news for congregations. They have little hope of boosting attendance by encouraging early marriage and childbearing. On the other hand, young adult attendance is not driven by distaste for denominational identities, ideological schism, or active distrust of institutions. Rather, Wuthnow suggests, innovative congregations from any tradition could offer social and institutional support that society has largely failed to provide single and childless younger adults.

### **Characteristics of “Vital Congregations”**

More than three-quarters of young adults (18-44) already attend church at least occasionally. What kinds of churches do they attend? The National Congregations Survey estimates one-third of American churchgoers attend a congregation where 35 percent or more adults are 35 or younger (Wuthnow 2007). Compared to others, these “youthful” congregations are more likely to be urban, ethnically diverse, founded more recently, and have more children in attendance. They are on average larger, with a higher proportion of new worshippers, suggesting they may be growing more rapidly than older congregations. Youthful congregations are also more likely to use overhead projectors during worship and to supplement piano and organ music with drums and electric guitars.

Hackett (2010) finds similar results using different data (the US Congregational Life Survey) and a narrower definition of young adults. He finds congregations with at least 10 percent 18-29-year-olds are larger, more racially diverse, and have proportionally more men than congregations with fewer young adults. He also finds striking differences across Christian traditions; while 59 percent of evangelical and 31 percent of Catholic congregations meet the 10 percent threshold, only 10 percent of mainline Protestant churches do.

Wuthnow argues that differences between youthful and older congregations are largely a matter of proximity, not preference. Many young adults live in urban areas, and urban churches are more likely to be racially diverse. However, young adults are present in congregations of all sizes; fewer than one in five 21-45-year-olds attend a church with more than 1,000 members, and about one in five attends a church with less than 100. Wuthnow finds no evidence to suggest they prefer larger congregations (preference for diversity is another matter, which I discuss below). To understand what kinds of congregations appeal to younger adults, I turn from quantitative to qualitative research.

## Findings from Case Studies

Case study research situates congregational practices within particular social locations, theological commitments, and cultural contexts. In examining particularity, researchers discern how congregations develop principles and practices that situate young adults' religious yearnings and doubts within the congregation's mission and identity.

Two recent research projects most inform this overview of qualitative research. The Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults (or Changing SEA) project (<http://www.changingsea.org/>) includes eight profiles of best practices in Christian congregations with a strong young adult presence. The profiles include two evangelical, three Catholic, and three mainline/progressive congregations, all in urban settings. Six are large with a sizeable minority of young adults; two are small, predominantly young adult congregations, which rely heavily on larger, parent congregations for funding and worship space.

In the "Congregations that Get it" study, researchers studied three congregations from each of four faith traditions: Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic. The twelve congregations were all urban and intergenerational; they were selected to represent a broad theological spectrum within each faith tradition. Study results are reported in detail in the book *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*. The book also includes essays by practitioners from each religious tradition.

In reading these case studies together with survey research and interviews with practitioners, commonalities emerge across the divides of religious tradition and the spectrum of conservative/liberal theological beliefs. Some distinctions are also underscored, such as the unique role minority religions play in the identity development of young adherents. I touch on such distinctions, but I focus on the common threads, which I discuss in terms of four themes: identity, inclusion, inspiration, and innovation. Each theme is a crucial element of crafting a religious encounter that is authentic, accessible, and animating for a whole congregation, but particularly for young adults.

### Identity

In an environment of spiritual tinkering, religious pluralism, and the declining significance of denominations, *more* attention to a congregation's identity, not less, is necessary. That is the conclusion of John Roberto (of LifelongFaith Associates) and Mike Hayes (author of *Googling God*). Their summary of best practices in young adult ministry argues it is "imperative" that congregations build community and encourage spiritual seeking "in the context of a clearly defined faith tradition" (2007, p 11). Congregational profiles confirm the importance of a clearly articulated collective identity: one grounded in a particular faith tradition but infused with a strong leader's vision and responsive to local contexts.

Some orthodox congregations have created a “niche” within their communities by encouraging inquiry while highlighting distinctive orthodox traditions. St. Ann’s Parish, a Roman Catholic “mega-parish,” has more than 28,000 members and seven weekly Masses. For young adult parishioners, much of the appeal comes from the church’s emphasis on being unapologetically Catholic (Bruce 2010). Young adults are encouraged to attend Mass, go to confession, adhere to Church teachings on moral and social issues, and to spend time in the Perpetual Adoration Chapel, where parish members can pray and contemplate Scripture in the presence of the Eucharist 24 hours a day, year-round. Through small groups targeted toward “Twenty-Somethings,” young adults have space to learn about the sacraments and church teachings and to encourage each other to rise to the challenge of embodying those teachings in a society that (in their view) encourages relativism.

Articulating a clear identity is one thing; communicating it is another. Evangelism is one model for communicating identity, but many liberal congregations avoid this framework. Instead, they think in terms of p. r. or “branding”—often with concerns about mixing the sacred with such calculatedly market-driven secular activity. Catholic theologian and Boston College professor Tim Muldoon (2008) argues that marketing spirituality is only a bad idea if what a ministry is “selling” is a lie. Effective marketing may not only attract newcomers but energize a congregation around a coherent vision of ministry.

Middle Collegiate Church (a progressive Protestant congregation in New York City) established a “brand” that both expresses and re-centers the congregation’s identity (Yukich 2010). Four words appear prominently on the church website, ads, and documents: welcoming, inclusive, bold, and artistic. Church activities aim to embody these four concepts, from a rich musical program that includes regular performances by professional musicians to an active Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex ministry. Younger members name its radical inclusivity and the emotional resonance of its music and arts as key to the congregation’s appeal. Middle Church creates an authentic religious encounter for young adults not through young-adult-friendly programming (which it also has) but through opportunities to embody a clearly articulated vision of progressive religious community.

For religious minorities, congregations can play a distinctive role in personal identity formation. In the United States, most people perceive religious identity to be *achieved* or chosen rather than *ascribed*, or inherited. Empirical research suggests second-generation Muslims and Hindus apply this thinking to their faith as well (Warner 2002). Sociologist Lori Peek’s (2005) interviews with Muslim college students propose a model of religious identity development moving from ascribed to chosen to publicly declared Islamic identity. At mosques in Detroit, second generation Muslim young adults report interest in distinguishing between practices that are general to Islam and those that are peculiar to ethnic or national cultures (Bagby 2007). Sometimes, they criticize their elders for failing to make such distinctions. Congregations that respond to this desire to choose one’s religious identity can both guide and affirm young adults who navigate majority and minority cultural worlds.

## Inclusion

Case studies report congregations that appeal to young adults are remarkably inclusive in three respects. They meet young adults where they are on their faith journey. They embody some form of diversity. And they invite young adults to leadership in congregational life.

**Accessible:** Accessible congregations "meet young adults where they are" in terms of religious knowledge and commitment (Belzer and Miller 2007). Today's young adults have diverse religious experiences. Almost half of 18-23-year-olds are disinvested from the customs of a particular denomination or faith tradition (Smith 2009). At the same time, many young adults are interested in interfaith exploration; one-third of 21-45-year-olds have attended services at a non-Christian place of worship (Wuthnow 2007). Along with diverse knowledge about religion, young adults often have anxiety about commitment—whether to a congregation, a romantic partner, or a job (Cunningham 2009). Many typical ways congregations build community with newcomers—joining small groups, serving on committees, making financial pledges—assume some basic knowledge and routine time commitments that prove to be barriers for younger adults.

From observations at twelve congregations, Belzer, et al. (2007) conclude that congregations that "get it" offer multiple points of entry into the life of the congregation: from worship services at various times during the week to spiritual retreats, Bible studies and adult education programs, social gatherings and opportunities to volunteer. They also avoid guilt trips or shame about young adults' sometimes-inconsistent attendance. Rabbi J. Rolondo Matalon of Congregation Bnai Jeshurun in Manhattan says that in a community, there has to be room for asymmetric exchanges of support (2007). His congregation aims to balance non-judgmental welcome with invitations to deeper engagement.

**Diversity:** Today's young adults are inclined to embrace diversity, or at least to honor individual differences, across a variety of measures. Compared to older cohorts, 18-29-year-olds support interracial dating, affirmative action, and gay marriage at higher rates (Smith 2009). While many young adults crave an inclusive, diverse faith community, that inclusivity is filtered through the lens of social and faith backgrounds. Inclusion may mean visible racial diversity, support for gay marriage and clergy, or allowing women to preach. What is largely consistent across congregations profiled is an *intentional* effort to embrace diversity in some form.

When New Life evangelical fellowship intentionally built a racially diverse congregation, they found themselves also attracting younger members (Cimino 2010). At The Crossing, a small "emergent" Christian church in Boston, progressive theology and a "radical welcome" are embodied by a congregation and leadership board with half straight and half gay, lesbian, queer, or transgendered people (Kaell 2010). At the Islamic Center of Southern California, the nine-person board includes four women, and



some women choose to wear headscarves only during prayer (not during board meetings and social gatherings) (Belzer, et al 2007). These deliberate efforts convey powerful messages about what these congregations believe religious devotion looks like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Leadership:** All of the congregations in the ChangingSEA and Congregations That Get It studies include young adults in visible leadership roles within the church. Those roles involve varying degrees of commitment—from serving as occasional readers, musicians, and worship planners to chairing committees or serving as clergy. All Area Dulles Muslim Society (ADAMS) in Washington, DC, serves 10,000 Sunni participants. This large mosque deliberately seeks young adult leadership to ensure it will thrive in the long term; in the mid-2000s, its Sunday School director was 25, and all four executive officers were in their 30s (Belzer, et al. 2007).

Even in communities with particularly rapid young adult migration—such as college and university towns—congregations find ways to nurture young leaders. At St. Peter's Catholic Student Center in Waco, TX, that transient population of students *is* the core leadership of the congregation. A small group of older adults regularly joins students in worship. These adults see themselves in a supporting or mentoring role, appreciating the chance to see young adults test themselves by putting ambitious ministry ideas into practice (Palmer 2010). Brother John of Taizé (another Catholic ministry famous for its work with young adults) writes "when given responsibility, [young adults] very often rise to it" (2007, p 157). Relationships grounded in mutual trust are key to sharing the power and responsibilities that come with leadership roles.

## Inspiration

Larry Braskamp studied faith-based colleges' investment in students' development. His advice to colleges also applies to congregations. He argues, "community is most effective in fostering student development when students regard it as a community of support and challenge" (2007, p 1). Many congregations that reach out to young adults begin and end their ministry with hospitality: providing a safe, non-judgmental environment. Hospitality is crucial, but those who study young adult development argue that young adults both expect and deserve more from religious communities. As Sharon Daloz-Parks would say, they deserve mentors who will support them through crises and encourage them to dream worthwhile dreams for their future.

Three congregational "best practices" are particularly inspiring for young adults: dynamic, participatory, and emotionally engaging worship; invested clergy; and opportunities to serve. Young adults are often associated with "contemporary" styles of worship. Wuthnow (2007) and Flory and Miller (2008) argue that many of the features associated with contemporary worship—such as praise music and an informal setting—most appeal to the Baby Boomer generation. Hackett (2010) finds 18-29-year-olds report valuing traditional and contemporary worship about evenly. More important to them is worship that engages both brain and body (Flory and Miller 2008). It is no

coincidence that congregations with active young adult membership often emphasize arts and music. Young adults (21-45) who pray or meditate regularly are more likely to do so while listening to music than while reading the Bible or a devotional guide (Wuthnow 2007). Compared to older adults, they draw fewer boundaries between secular and sacred music. Whereas older adults are more likely to report being inspired by “church music”—classical, traditional hymns, and even Christian pop music, younger adults find spiritual inspiration from music they listen to everyday (Wuthnow 2007). For more on congregational worship styles and practices, see Royle’s report “FACTs on Worship: 2010.”

Clergy have an especially important role as mentors. At Consolidated Baptist, an African American Southern Baptist Congregation in Lexington, KY, Pastor Richard Gaines tells young adults to “Think Big!” (Bower 2010). He has ambitions for young adults in his community, especially vulnerable African American college students who may be struggling to balance work, school, and family obligations. For African American and Latino young adults, religious congregations can be a source of strength and encouragement in the face of social and economic pressures (Warner 2002; Owens 2010). Rev. Gaines spends time at the local university campus, meeting young people, listening to their stories, and inviting them to worship. Inspired by his passion, Consolidated Baptist now offers a weekly “Real Talk” Bible study for young adults, includes young adults in leadership positions, and incorporates hip-hop music into worship. Other congregations with large, diverse young adult programming tell similar stories of clergy with vision who get the ball rolling.

Finally, congregations also give young adults opportunities to reach out to others, whether through evangelism, volunteer work, social justice advocacy, or experiences like short-term mission trips. From a developmental perspective, young adults are deeply self-focused: they are learning who they are and what kind of adults they hope to be. This does not mean they are selfish; indeed, for many, one sign of maturity is attending to the needs of others (Arnett 2004). Congregations make it easy for young adults to put that interest into practice through social outreach programs.

## **Innovation**

The 1,200 members at non-denominational New Life Fellowship in Queens, New York, are adept spiritual tinkerers. Leaders mix an evangelical mission and theology with neo-monastic and contemplative practices to foster an “emotionally healthy spirituality.” Sociologist Richard Cimino (2010) argues that this ability to maintain a core identity while innovating in non-core aspects of church life may be key to sustainable long-term growth for any congregation.

Pastor Carol Howard Merritt makes a similar point in *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation*. She says congregations that want to build strong intergenerational relationships should bear in mind Diana Butler Bass’ distinction between *tradition* and *customs*. Traditions ground a search for truth or meaning through continuity with

historical ways of knowing and practicing faith. Customs are the things congregations (and people) do simply because that's how they have always done them. They make up the "invisible rule book" of congregational life, and Merritt argues that customs can and should be changed if congregations hope to welcome new members into their communities. She cautions that many congregations eagerly add young adults to committees in the hopes of relieving burned-out older leaders; fewer congregations are able to let go of customs enough to allow young leaders to shape the direction of the church.

Successful innovation is attentive to a congregation's core identity and the dynamic social contexts in which that congregation is embedded. Thus, a program founded in one congregational setting may be inappropriate or require adaptation for another. Below is a partial list of innovative ways congregations have responded to the needs of a young adult population:

#### *Linking the Social and Spiritual*

Many young adult-focused ministries blur the lines between the sacred and the social. Those lines exist for a reason, but well-considered changes to the ways congregations use physical space or time events can highlight the continuity of the sacred and social functions of congregational life. At St. Peter's Catholic Student Center, students hang out in the space for hours, chatting, doing homework, or watching movies; when it is time to worship, students "fluidly transition" within the same space (Palmer 2010). In Detroit, young adult Muslims feel greater connection to their mosques if they see mosques as a place to make friends and play as well as learn and pray (Bagby 2007).

Some congregations take the sacred to secular spaces. The Catholic Diocese of Chicago has popularized the practice of "Theology on Tap:" evenings at a bar or restaurant where keynote speakers address matters of faith, from vocations and moral puzzles to Catholic social teaching (Cusick and Devries 2001). The basic premise of Theology on Tap – conversations about faith in a neutral, sociable environment for people who may be wary of religious institutions – has been adopted by diverse (largely Christian) traditions. They have also adapted the event, for example traditions that disapprove of alcohol or want to welcome people in recovery may shift venues to a coffee shop.

#### *Informal Networks*

Congregations are great at creating small groups or programs to cater to special needs; young adult ministries often take the form of named programs, like the humorous "Bagels and Bible" study group or the straightforward "Jewish Young Adults of Hoboken/Hudson." Clay United Methodist took a different approach, focusing on relationships and face-to-face networking (Farrell 2010). At Clay, young adult gatherings over coffee or dinner are "obsessively informal." Events are not named. There is no agenda. Dates and times are not simply announced on Facebook or in the church bulletin with an open invitation. Instead, the pastor or host invites younger adults personally. Information about events circulates through email or word of mouth. The

obsessive informality can be reassuring for a group unable to make or uncomfortable with time-intensive commitments. The personal touch connects with young adults' craving to feel like a vital part of a community. Though the focus is on quality of relationships, not quantity, these methods have grown Clay's young adult population to about 15 percent of regular church participants.

### *Rethinking Social Media*

Congregations wanting to engage younger adults almost certainly need a basic digital literacy and some kind of web presence to be taken seriously. Maintaining an up-to-date website with a calendar of events keeps congregants of all ages in the loop. Many churches also post sermons or podcasts online; a few even maintain a primarily online presence. Revolution Church, ([www.revolutionnyc.com](http://www.revolutionnyc.com)), with branches in Atlanta and Brooklyn, meets weekly for services (at a music venue in Brooklyn), but its largest ministry is a podcast broadcasting sermons to a weekly audience of thousands. For more on congregations and technology, see Thumma (2011) for an overview of US congregations' technology use; Farrell (2011) for a comparison of conservative and mainline Protestant congregations' web use; and Miller, Mundy, and Hill (2013) or Bobkowski and Pearce (2011) for research on young adults, religion, and social media usage.

Media-savvy congregations have found the Internet and social media to be a double-edged sword. In D.C., young adults use Facebook to learn about upcoming Catholic events across the city (Garces-Foley 2010). They can also check Facebook to find out who plans to attend or not. Some single young adults admit they peruse the guest list for attractive prospects, hoping to meet like-minded singles. A counter-productive cycle begins, with invitees waiting to see what others will do, then ultimately deciding not to go when the "yes" column is low (which may be because peers are also playing the wait-and-see game).

Rabbis Josh Feigelson and Scott Aaron urge congregations to reframe their thinking when it comes to technology and social media. Rather than asking how congregations can *use* technology to reach young adults, they say, ask: "How do developments in technology change what it means to be an emerging adult?" (Feigelson and Aaron, forthcoming). In other words, technology is not only a tool, it's a social force that shapes daily life. For young adults, technology plays a role in key developmental tasks, from finding romantic partners to maintaining friendships to searching for meaningful work. To use technology judiciously, congregations must consider how technology shapes human relationships – and what that means for building community as a congregation.

### *Extra-congregational ventures*

Many innovative practices in young adult ministries take place outside congregational contexts: on college campuses, in mission fields around the world, through business ventures, or through geographically dispersed social networks (to name a few). Guides to campus ministry abound; an Amazon search for "college ministry" produces nearly 4,500 results. Many include advice for partnering with local congregations to foster intergenerational connections. Religious programs modeled after the Peace Corps or

AmeriCorps place young people in faith-based social service agencies or mission fields around the globe. Some recruit local congregations to provide housing, mentors, and a spiritual home during volunteers' stay.

Faith-driven business ventures apply free market enterprise to spiritual purposes. National Community Church in Washington, D.C., owns and operates Ebenezer's, a coffeehouse "with a cause." The café has free wi-fi, meeting spaces, and live music events, serving as a community hub and hangout space (<http://ebenezerscoffeehouse.com/>). Whether or not customers become church members, the coffee shop serves the church's mission by offering a calm, welcoming space in a fast-paced city, investing in fair trade products, and using proceeds to support social outreach programs.

Reboot is a multi-city non-profit venture with the goal of helping new generations "grapple with questions of Jewish identity, community, and meaning" ([www.rebooters.net](http://www.rebooters.net)). An annual summit provides a focal point for a broad network of Jewish and non-Jewish artists, academics, social activists, and politicians to maintain conversation and jump-start local events, art installations, and other creative ventures, such as the Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation, which curates a digital archive of Jewish music, releasing albums with engrossing liner notes about the creation of songs and artists' lives ([www.rebootstereophonic.com](http://www.rebootstereophonic.com)).

## **Conclusion**

Despite widespread indifference to religious organizations among young adults, recent research documents many effective congregational responses to this population's changing social worlds. Appropriately, these responses are as varied as the population of young adults itself. Having a clear identity, inspiring community members, and innovative worship and programs are all characteristics of thriving congregations, no matter the age of members. Certain practices are especially resonant for young adults: inclusion of diverse voices; invitation to share leadership responsibilities; cultivating mentoring relationships; blending the social and sacred functions of congregational life. These are just a few of the ways congregations create a welcoming community for young spiritual tinkerers.

Though research on young adults' religiosity has expanded rapidly in the past ten years, some aspects of young adults' religious engagement remain cloudy. The case studies in this review all depict thriving congregations in urban settings, neglecting smaller and suburban or rural congregations. They are also success stories, and clearly not all congregations are succeeding with young adults. It is not enough to contrast success stories with all other churches; failure is different from inadequacy. Future research should consider whether and how congregations fail young adults.

Existing research has made some effort to examine differences in terms of racial/ethnic background and religious tradition, though much more could be done. More importantly,

research overwhelmingly focuses on college-educated or -attending young adults. Undoubtedly, these young people can benefit from and offer much to congregations. Yet evidence suggests congregations can be an even greater lifeline for marginalized young adults. The barriers to religious participation are higher for these groups. While practitioners may specialize in vulnerable populations, more systematic research could provide key insights into ways congregations can best engage vulnerable young adults – such as those who have “graduated” from foster care or the juvenile justice system, runaways, or those living with mental or physical disabilities without the support of strong family networks.

Congregations that fear that churches are failing to reach young adults have reason to worry. The customs and rhythms of congregational life are designed for stability and continuity with the past; they are not well suited to dramatic, rapid transition. Young adults today spend long stretches of their life in an unsettled state marked by uncertainty, instability, and hope. Congregations that cannot adapt to minister to a mobile population of spiritual tinkerers have little hope of convincing young people that religious institutions have any relevance for their lives, now or in the future. The uncertain futures congregations now face have inspired both researchers and faith communities to better understand and respond to young adults’ religious beliefs and yearnings. The body of research reveals that, like their target population, congregational efforts to engage young adults show both vulnerability and promise.

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