

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults **Best Practices for Congregations**

By Perry Chang

Starbucks? Yes. Boring worship? No.

Involving people from their late teens to early 30s in congregational leadership, having high-quality and innovative worship, and accepting people with their coffee cups, shorts, and diverse theologies are all critical parts of incorporating younger people into congregations. Having young adult-only or young adult-heavy worshiping communities, nested inside of existing congregations or as stand-alone congregations, can also be important. Even starting new intergenerational worshiping communities or moving existing congregations to new locations can help.

These are findings of a landmark Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP)/Faith Communities Today (FACT) young adult incorporation study. The study included: (1) a sweeping review of existing studies about young-adult involvement in congregations; (2) a penetrating analysis of 2010 FACT survey data; and (3) a dozen or so innovative case studies of congregations from various faith traditions with heavy young-adult involvement. The partnership brings together religious researchers and religious leaders from more than 40 U.S. Christian denominations and other faith groups who provide research-based resources to promote congregational vitality.

Participation in U.S. religious communities has been declining for decades, but attendance by young adults has decreased more rapidly, notes Princeton researcher LiErin Probasco in her literature review. As adolescence extends into “emerging adulthood,” young people have been marrying later and having children later. At the same time, fewer and fewer single or childless people have been involved in congregations. These trends account for a share of young adults’ disappearance from the pews, Probasco maintains. Young adults’ increasing anti-institutionalism and lack of theological orthodoxy and the fact that the fraction of the U.S. population in this age group has been shrinking have also contributed.

In spite of these developments, some U.S. congregations have been successful at incorporating young adults, note Probasco and CCSP/FACT researchers Monte Sahlin and David Roozen. Sahlin and Roozen analyzed findings of the 2010 FACT survey, the fourth in a series of surveys that have typically mixed surveys of congregations within FACT member faith communities with surveys of random samples of U.S. congregations. The two researchers focused on congregations in which more than one in five participants (21 percent or more) are between 18 and 34 years old. One in six (16 percent) of the 11,000 congregations surveyed fall in this category.

Many of the three researchers' findings confirm what the case-study researchers found. The case-study researchers mixed interviewing, observation, and archival and web research.

In Leadership

Intentionally involving young adults in leadership is something many of the case-study worshiping communities do. This is, of course, the case for young adult-only congregations and young adult worshiping communities within congregations. For example, at the Harriman (Utah) Latter Day Saints (LDS or "Mormon") all-young single adult congregation, outside of Salt Lake City, most members receive a "calling." A pastoral leader asks the member to serve on 1 of the congregation's 12 committees. The committees arrange most of the congregation's activities, and one of the committees sends its members out to visit members of the congregation who have not participated recently. In addition, about one-third of members visit other members each month to share an evangelical message.

Intergenerational congregations with large young adult attendance, however, also have young adults in leadership. At the Baha'i Center of Houston, for example, 1 in 10 congregational board members are young adults, and most teachers of classes for children and youth and half of the rotating worship leaders are young adults. The Bahai' faith originated in Iran in the 1800s and draws from most world religions.

Having younger people in long-term pastoral and worship leadership also seems important. In 3 of the 10 worshiping communities studied, pastoral or worship leaders are in their 20s or early 30s. In 3 more, pastoral leaders are in their 40s.

Both of the case-study congregational leaders in their 20s are women. Krista Kutz is a liturgical minister at Old St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Chicago, and Mandy Morante is the pastor of The Well, a young adult-only worshiping community that is part of Evangel Church, an Assembly of God-affiliated congregation in suburban New Jersey.

Quality Worship Experience

The seven researchers who attended worship at the case-study communities they studied all commented on the worship's high quality, and all but one also described the worship as informal, innovative, or experimental. Young adult attendees interviewed also commented on this as something that has attracted and kept them in the communities.

Many of the large case-study congregations use state-of-the-art video and projection technology and top-notch musicians and vocalists on their worship teams. For example, at ChristWay Community Church, a Southern Baptist-affiliated congregation outside of Chattanooga (Tennessee), musicians who are part of the worship team must audition.

At Sunday worship services at Chicago's New Life Covenant Church, performances by the congregation's 15-member dance team and videos with announcements presented in the form of news reports are projected on the huge screens in the University of Illinois at Chicago's cavernous auditorium, where the congregation currently worships.

Half of the 10 case-study worshipping communities include guitars and drums in their worship services. On the one hand, even a small, mainline Protestant congregation—Atlanta's Kirkwood United Church of Christ—uses guitars and projection equipment. On the other hand, with half of the case-study worshipping communities attracting sizable numbers of young adults without these markers of "contemporary" worship style, contemporary worship is apparently not an absolute requirement for young adult participation.

This is consistent with the FACT 2010 results, which showed that roughly half of young adult-heavy congregations use electric guitar and bass regularly. These instruments are used by twice as many of these young adult-heavy congregations as they are by other congregations.

Catholic and Orthodox case-study congregations, in particular, have more traditional worship, but young adults still find the worship appealing. Commented a young adult attending worship at Chicago's Old St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church for the first time: "I recognize all the hymns from the Catholic Church I grew up in but I have never heard them performed so beautifully." He said the music was both "familiar" and "fresh."

Innovation

Innovation and use of technology by young adult-heavy congregations extend beyond worship to communication. Half a dozen of the case-study congregations use Facebook or Twitter to communicate with people involved in their worshipping communities. At Spokane's Life Center, young adult-heavy small groups share prayer requests via text message, and at the Boston area's St. Mary Orthodox Church the priest texts daily inspirational messages to parishioners. At Tennessee's ChristWay Community, the pastor invites worshipers to follow along with the scripture passages and his sermon notes via applications on their smartphones. All of this is consistent with findings from Sahlin and Roozen's analysis of FACT 2010 survey results. FACT 2010 congregations with significant use of technology were twice as likely to be young adult-heavy as were congregations with minimal use of technology.

For the case-study congregations, innovation led congregations in other directions too. Half of the case-study congregations have developed events popular with young adults that cross the line between worship and secular social events. Some of these events take place outside of conventional congregational spaces. Kirkwood, Old St. Pat's, and Temple Micah sponsor events that mix drinking and theological reflection: Kirkwood's "Wine Down Wednesdays," Micah's "Drinks and Drash," and Old St. Pat's "Theology on Tap." Drinks and Drash takes place each time in a different restaurant or bar near

where young adult worshipers work. The LDS's Herriman congregation has a dry "Mix and Mingle" night and a talent show, and a number of members play with each other on local volleyball teams. Spokane's Life Center, affiliated with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, sponsors half a dozen College Houses, where students linked with the congregation live, pray, and serve together. Another example is Old St. Pat's "World's Largest Block Party." Planning, executing, and recovering from this epic event absorb so much of the time and energy of the congregation's staff and other leaders that it was not easy for the researcher studying Old St. Pat's to complete her research in June, when the block party takes place.

Hospitality

At 7 of the 10 case-study congregations, researchers or young-adult participants describe the congregations as very "accepting," both of young adults and of people in general. At 3 of the 10 congregations, that means giving worshipers the option of not "dressing up" for worship. At 6 of the 10 congregations, that means providing food and coffee or permitting worshipers to bring coffee into worship. Offering pizza, nachos, breakfast food, barbeque, and even espresso seems to help nurture and keep young adults in the fold. At Tennessee's ChristWay, biennial outdoor baptism celebrations out in the pond in front of congregational facilities feature hot dogs, lawn chairs, and cheering crowds. At ChristWay's indoor services, worshipers are encouraged to bring their free coffee (provided by the congregation) into worship. Researcher Carole Kilcher's observation about ChristWay was repeated by other researchers and their informants about the other worshiping communities too: "The philosophy that this is a place to 'come as you are' with no need to dress up gives young adults a place with a Starbucks-like feel where they know they will be accepted and find a place to belong."

"Don't judge" is a mantra repeated at Spokane's Life Center, signaling that "accepting" also means tolerating theological diversity. At The Well, which is designed to be interdenominational and draws some young adults from other area congregations, this means de-emphasizing The Well's parent church's teachings about speaking in tongues. At Kirkwood, this means welcoming homosexual Christians, Republicans, and "even people who support Chick-Fil-A because that's the gospel of Jesus."

At Old St. Patrick's, being accepting also means permitting young adults (whose lives, schedules, and locales change frequently) to serve on committees without having to make multi-year committee service commitments. And at Temple Micah, being accepting means waiving the fees for participation in young adult-only High Holidays worship services.

Reaching Out

At the case-study congregations, having a large number of young adults is not something that has happened by accident. Congregational leaders have been intentional about connecting with people age 18 to 34. Leaders of half of FACT young

adult-heavy congregations also indicated that their congregations have a “strong” emphasis on young adult ministry.

Also, in 7 of the 10 case-study congregations, the pastoral leaders have made incorporating young adults a personal priority. At Atlanta’s Kirkwood and D.C.’s Temple Micah, the pastors helped start young adult fellowships by inviting young adults over to their homes. At St. Mary’s Orthodox Church in Cambridge (Massachusetts), recent priests have served as Orthodox chaplains at the neighboring Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and one of the priests has been active at New England camps where many area Orthodox youth spend time before they become young adults.

Emphasizing young adult outreach should not make congregational leaders seem like used car salesmen, caution researchers and informants in three case studies. Young adults are looking for “authentic” experiences and looking like one is trying to “sell” something is a sure way to seem inauthentic, they warn. For example, Kirkwood’s seminary intern describes the congregation in this way: “I think we are really authentic. We are not doing this in a smarmy way, but we really are because we live it. What you see is what you get. (The pastor) has been firm with me that we don’t want to be a ‘slick church,’ so we’ve found a beautiful balance between doing something nice with care and still being authentic.”

Investing in Young People

Similarly, if an existing, intergenerational congregation is trying to incorporate more young adults into its ranks or into a special worshiping community nested within it, they will likely need to invest time, energy, and money into this initiative without expecting this necessarily to land them more members or to pay for itself in giving by new young adult attendees.

“It is absolutely critical that the (congregation’s) leadership have total clarity that short-term increase in the congregation’s membership is not the goal of its next-generation outreach project,” writes Temple Micah researcher Ramie Arian. “This is a particularly difficult message for many congregations, as it is natural to take a position of resisting the expenditure of limited resources on projects unlikely to result in a visible return on investment, measured in the usual, fiscal terms.”

Two case-study congregations have received denominational or parachurch support for young adult initiatives. It seems likely that the Herriman congregation is subsidized by the LDS denomination, whose finances are centralized, and Temple Micah was given financial support by a cross-denominational Jewish organization. All 10 of the case-study worshiping communities are linked with denominations, but only half of them emphasize this link.

Young adult worshiping communities associated with two larger congregations—Temple Micah’s Next DOR DC and Evangel Church’s The Well—are being subsidized by their parent congregations, also.

Newcomers

Young adult-heavy FACT 2010 congregations have been founded disproportionately more recently, and case-study congregations have followed suit. About two-thirds (7 out of 10) of the case-study worshiping communities were either founded since 1999 or moved to their current location since 1999. The newest is Herriman’s LDS congregation, which was re-organized as a young single adult-only congregation in 2011. Chicago’s New Life Covenant Church is planning to move worship locations shortly.

One exception is Chicago’s Old St. Patrick’s, which was founded in 1846. Old St. Patrick’s reputation as a beautiful, old, historic, Irish-American church and church home of former Mayor Richard M. Daley has helped make this congregation a popular wedding locale for metro Chicago area young adults. The congregation’s marriage preparation activities (mandatory for aspiring St. Pat’s newlyweds), in turn, funnel engaged couples into its late Sunday afternoon mass, which is popular with young adults.

Location, Location, Location

One factor that appears in both the FACT 2010 data and the case-study findings is largely outside of congregational control. The FACT 2010 young adult-heavy congregations are disproportionately found in urban and suburban areas, as well as

high-population growth areas. Case-study congregations are located in a litany of large metropolitan areas: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Houston, and Washington (D.C.), for example. Some are also located in areas with a large concentration of college students. In Chicago, New Life Covenant Church actually worships on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago. In Atlanta, Kirkwood United Church of Christ draws energy and leadership from half a dozen students at Atlanta area seminaries.

Whether your congregation or prospective new congregational development site is located in a big city or small town or in a college town or a 55-plus community, whether you’re a 50-something organizing pastor or a 20-something layperson in an existing congregation wanting to worship with more young adults; is it worth the trouble to try to connect with people in their late teens to early 30s?

Yes, say case-study researchers and informants resoundingly. Says Bridger, a Herriman worshiper, about the concentration of young adults in that congregation: “We’re in it together. We’re in the same situation, and it’s fun.” Adds one of Bridger’s peers at Herriman: “I’m celebrating my one-year anniversary of coming back to the

church after spending a while on some undesirable paths. I am grateful for my second chance with the church.”

Armed with important insight and information, perhaps actual and potential U.S. congregations too will have a “second chance” to incorporate more young adults into their congregations.

Perry Chang teaches sociology at Bellarmine University and Jefferson Community and Technical College in Louisville, Kentucky. For eight years Chang conducted survey and focus group research for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). His research dealt with issues such as congregational growth and the development of multicultural congregations. He also advised congregations involved in mission discernment. Chang served as program chair for the 2013 annual meeting of the Religious Research Association in Boston. He also served as chair of the membership committee for the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership. Chang has served as a ruling elder at Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church.