

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults **Kirkwood United Church of Christ**

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This case study focuses on Kirkwood United Church of Christ (KUCC), a progressive Protestant Christian community located in the heart of Atlanta's Kirkwood neighborhood. KUCC is a new church, started in 2006 by the Reverend Susannah Davis at a local coffee shop owned by Susannah and her partner Susan.

Considered to be one of the most vibrant new churches in the United Church of Christ (UCC), KUCC has received publicity and financial support from the denomination and was most recently featured in a news story highlighting the congregation's participation in Mission 4/1 Earth, a church-wide effort to bring greater awareness and action on earth care and environmental issues. (United Church News, March 5, 2013) The church also received funding from the UCC's New and Renewing Church Fund, was featured in national promotional materials for this same fund, and has been highlighted in a number of other denominational publications.

The description from the church's website states: "Kirkwood United Church of Christ is a progressive Christian community gathered in the Kirkwood neighborhood of Atlanta and serving our surrounding communities, including East Lake, Oakhurst, Decatur, Edgewood, Candler Park and Grant Park. We are a vibrant congregation that worships together and serves together, that cares about others and seeks to be authentic, and is welcoming of all people. We are actively engaged in our community, living out Jesus' gospel of justice, mercy, love and grace."

The description continues: "God is love, and at Kirkwood UCC we believe God's love belongs to all of us. As a congregation, we strive to open our hearts without fear of seeming different and open our doors to share God's love with the entire community. We not only worship together, but also serve together. We believe in reaching out to those in need, just as we reach out to hold each other up. Above all, we believe in the transformative power of God's love in human hearts. Everyone, Everyone, Everyone is Invited and Welcomed!" (Church Web site)

Data Collection

A three-day site visit to Kirkwood United Church of Christ was conducted in late April 2013. The researcher had the opportunity to participate in a number of activities including a Sunday evening worship service, a community outreach event in conjunction with Mission 4/1 Earth, Soup Saturday community meal, and a young adult gathering. The researcher also engaged in numerous informal conversations with KUCC participants, conducted a focus group with 21 young adults from the congregation, and held in-depth interviews with three key leaders: Davis, KUCC pastor and founder; Mary Kathryn Tippet, coordinator of the young adult group; and Anna Flowers, current seminarian intern and participant in/supporter of the young adult group. In-depth

interviews were recorded and transcribed, and extensive notes were taken of the focus group and participant activities.

In addition, thorough reviews of the church's website, promotional/event materials, and other church documents were conducted, as well as a review of denominational and local community materials in which KUCC was featured. All information in this case study originated from data collected during the site visit and from relevant documents.

Description of the Congregation and Key Demographics

The vision and mission of KUCC is as follows: "Worship. Love. Serve." Davis articulated, "If it fits within one of these three areas, that's what we try to be about in an authentic way." The congregation is also committed to radical inclusion in which "everyone, everyone, everyone" is welcome. This includes not only LGBT persons, but persons with whom others may not agree (Davis remarked, "Even people who support Chick-Fil-A because that's the gospel of Jesus").

In total, the number of affiliating individuals at KUCC is around 150; and on average, around 80-90 persons attend the weekly Sunday evening worship service, which occurs at 5:00 p.m. and lasts about an hour. The congregation has grown steadily over the six years of its existence and currently meets in a small, two-story, storefront building in which they are the primary renters.

There are two ways that individuals enter into covenant with the congregation, which is understood and practiced differently than a traditional membership process. As articulated on the KUCC website: "A person in *congregational covenant* is committed to being a full part of the life of the congregation by investing time, talent, service and financial resources, and by being in prayer with and for KUCC. A person in *faith covenant* believes in and chooses to follow Jesus the Christ, will celebrate and participate in the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, promises to grow in the grace and knowledge of God, three in one, and promises to be a witness of God's love in the world in word and deed." About 130 persons have entered into one or both of these covenants (roughly 85 percent of the total church community).

The rectangular shape of the physical space guides the setup, with the center of the rectangle as the focal point for the pulpit, altar table, two small screens, piano, and other musical instruments. Folding chairs turn into the center on either side so that half of the congregation faces the other half. The whole building is divided by a wall, and on the other side of the wall there is a small gathering space for a few tables, a nursery area, kitchen, and bathroom.

Worship is informal, yet follows a traditional Protestant structure. A paper bulletin, as well as a PowerPoint projected on two large monitors, guides the flow of the service. Two acoustic guitars (one played by Davis), a conga, and a string bass lead the music and singing. The opening song for Sunday's worship on the day of the research visit was "Get Together," popularized in the 1960s by The Youngbloods. The Children's

Time was a special blessing of the bikes, and anyone (regardless of age) brought their bike helmets forward and sat in the center space. A young adult seminary student led this moment, riding in on a small tricycle. Following this, a simple message was given by Davis, the offering was taken and blessed, prayers and joys were shared (one young adult lesbian couple announced their marriage the previous weekend, with the congregation exploding in cheers and applause), and the closing song was sung (“Hold Us Together” by contemporary Christian artist Matt Maher). Davis describes the worship as “authentic, homegrown, and not slick in any way.”

There also are a number of other activities and ministries that occur at KUCC including: A weekly Wednesday morning service of lectionary Bible study, communion, and meditation; small groups such as a liturgical writers’ gathering, community garden caretakers, monthly “Wine Down Wednesdays” where people can gather for wine or grape juice and fellowship; and various Bible study series throughout the year. Activities and gatherings are open to all; and there is a great deal of flexibility and fluidity in regard to the type, size, and duration of these activities.

One of the central community outreach ministries of KUCC is Soup Saturday, which has occurred the last two Saturdays of each month for the past three years. Around 11:00 a.m., people in need in the Kirkwood area come to the building to eat a meal. Prior to the start of the meal, Davis drives throughout the neighborhood to areas where transient people are known to gather and announces to folks to “come on over for some food.” Davis said, “We usually need to do this in order to remind people that there is food available.” Several individuals who benefit from this ministry also routinely help to prepare and serve the food, as well as attend the Sunday evening services and participate in other activities.

In terms of church demographics, roughly 80 percent are white. Other participants identify as non-white with the largest racial demographic being African American, many of whom also participate in Soup Saturday. Davis said this about other demographic indicators: “When we first started [in 2006], we prayed for men. We were mostly female. Now we are 60-40 female to male. We also prayed for more straight people to attend; and now we’re 60-40 straight to LGBT folks.” The congregation is also economically diverse, with a little less than one-third of people being either very poor or very wealthy. The majority of people, however, are somewhere in the middle-class income range of \$30,000-\$70,000 per year. Davis remarked, “We are not trying to pretend that we are diverse; but at the outset, we wanted to try to reflect the demographics of our neighborhood. In this way, we are pretty multicultural in the way that Kirkwood is multicultural.”

So far as the demographic of age, about 50 percent of the church is in the 30 to 50 age range, which makes them a younger congregation than the average mainline Protestant church. Ten percent is 50 and older, and twenty percent are children and youth 18 and under. This means that roughly 20 percent of the congregation is comprised of young adults (18 to 30), although there is a bit of nuance to this, as many of the young adults are seminarians, as will be shown below.

Community Setting and Congregational History

The neighborhood of Kirkwood and several of the surrounding neighborhoods in that area of Atlanta have experienced a rise in gentrification in recent years. Houses have been purchased and remodeled by middle class and upper middle class families (mostly white); and homes have become unaffordable by lower middle class families and individuals (mostly black) who have historically lived in the area. A stark contrast, however, is still visible in Kirkwood because of the continuing presence of low-income, transient, and homeless African Americans in spite of this gentrification.

It was this setting in which Davis and her partner, Susan, decided to purchase the local coffee shop in the Kirkwood community in 2006. They were both deeply committed to the economic revitalization of the community itself, not only the religious and spiritual nurture of the community. Worship began monthly in the coffee shop, called Gathering Grounds, in 2007; but they quickly outgrew that location and moved to the Kirkwood Community Center in 2008. By the end of 2008, they had also outgrown that space and moved worship to the Old Kirkwood Library, a private residence of one of KUCC's participating families. In late 2009, they moved into their current storefront space; and at the time of this writing they are at a point in which they have outgrown this space and are looking for a building to purchase, with possible financial assistance from the denomination.

Each worship location has intentionally remained in the Kirkwood community to reflect KUCC's ties and commitment to the neighborhood and its people. To this day, many of the special services, such as the Easter Sunrise and Blessing of the Animals, and the planned activities of the church are meant to be community-wide events and occur in a nearby park. Often, KUCC takes out ads in the neighborhood newsletter (*Kirkwood Neighbor*) and posts fliers around the area.

This particular area of Atlanta is also close to Candler School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary where Davis has taught a contextual education course for the past ten years, and the larger Emory University which has a substantial young adult population. In general, the greater religious context in which KUCC is situated lies within the heart of the "Bible Belt South," where larger, more theologically conservative churches than KUCC draw greater crowds of younger and older adults alike. United Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian (PCA) churches reside within the neighborhood; and a couple of new ministries that are particularly targeting young adults have been started in the area, which are also more theologically conservative than KUCC and may/may not be affiliated with a particular denomination.

Young Adults at KUCC

History: Davis described the increase in young adult worshippers at KUCC in this way: "Last year, we had two young adult seminarians who served as interns with us. They invited their friends from seminary to come to church. Then they invited other 20-

some things that lived in Atlanta. One day, I looked up during worship and noticed a bunch of 20-somethings were there! So, I was going out for coffee with all of these young people, inviting them to coffee one by one ... and I wasn't sure what questions to ask. I felt like an old woman, and I'm sure they were thinking that I was an old woman!"

In fact, Davis is only 42 at this writing. She started KUCC while still in her 30s, so she is not a great deal older than the young adults in the congregation. This could indeed be a characteristic that is a draw for young adults, although this researcher believes that her charismatic leadership style and her connections with Candler play a larger role in the growth of young adult participants than her own relative youth.

When she realized her young adult cohort was increasing, she met with the two seminarian interns, and together they decided to host a gathering for young adults at Davis and her partner's home, which the congregation refers to as "the parsonage" (though it is their personal home, not owned by the church). The people that were gathered decided to form an informal social group, and the next month they met for a pool party at the interns' apartment complex. In December 2012, the group held a Christmas party where new leadership for the group was chosen since the two seminarians finished their internship earlier that year. These have been the only three "official" events of the young adult group; however, they often walk to Pullman's, a local pub and eatery, following Sunday evening worship. Last year, the group also started a Facebook page; and they maintain contact with one another and announce events through the page.

Understanding the Constituency: It is estimated at this writing that 25-30 young adults (17 to 20 percent of the total congregation) participate in the life of KUCC. However, several individuals in their 30s (up to 35 years old) have also participated in young adult gatherings; so the total number of participants is around 30-35 (20 to 23 percent of the total congregation). The large majority of the group is Euro-American/white. There is a fairly even balance between single individuals and couples, and straight and LGBT young adults. Only a few of the participants have children. Davis stated that families with young children are more common among those in their later 30s and into their 40s.

The most striking characteristic of young adults at KUCC revolves around their education and vocational paths. The group is mostly comprised of graduate students and the spouses of those students (2/3 of the group); but there are a few individuals who are working professionals (1/3 of the group). In particular, KUCC has become a place that attracts young adult seminary students.

The reasons for this vary, but there are a few main factors that contribute to this confluence of young seminarians at KUCC: (1) Davis has served as contextual education faculty at Candler School of Theology for the past decade. She articulated that her presence there as a UCC minister has offered an alternative for seminary students who may be struggling with their sexuality and what it means for their ordination in more theologically conservative denominations. (2) Seminary students who are drawn to the UCC or to Davis and her ministry have invited other seminary students, spouses, and friends in Atlanta to attend KUCC. (3) Seminarians see the ministry of

KUCC as a place in which they can participate and develop their skills as future ministers. (4) The congregation, through the guidance of Davis, has embraced its role as a community that trains and sends ministers to serve throughout the denomination.

KUCC currently has nine Members in Discernment (MIDs). (Members in Discernment are individuals who are formally in the process of ordination in the United Church of Christ.) Seven of those nine individuals are young adults in their 20s. In the last couple of years, the church has also trained and ordained two other young adults who are now serving churches in other parts of the country.

It is important to note that not all of the seminary students present at KUCC attend or have attended Candler. Some students have come from Columbia Theological Seminary, a school of the Presbyterian Church (USA) located in nearby Decatur. Of the nine MIDs, only one was raised in the United Church of Christ—the rest were raised in other traditions.

The following activities and processes are in place or have occurred for the MIDs in terms of leadership development: (1) There is a MID Team at the church who meets with all of them and guides them through their process of ordination. Local church teams or committees of this kind are a general requirement for MIDs and are part of the ordination process in the UCC. (2) Once a year, they gather together at “the parsonage” for a cookout. (3) On Shrove Tuesday, Davis gathered with the group to talk about that process of burning ashes; and then they led the Ash Wednesday service as a way to engage in some hands-on, practical training. (4) As previously mentioned, several seminarians have completed their year-long internships with KUCC, which involved leading programs, preaching, and working with Davis on a regular basis. (5) Davis has held many one-on-one conversations with seminarians and offered mentoring, advice, and pastoral presence when needed. (6) All seminarians are encouraged by both Davis and the MID Team to develop their skills and follow their gifts and passions in ways that are most beneficial for them, including participating in leading worship, preaching, and coordinating various initiatives and programs in the church.

At KUCC, the young adult group and the MID group are comprised of many of the same individuals; so there is some degree of overlap. However, the young adults are more inclusive and thus are a larger, more diverse group. Anna Flowers, current KUCC seminarian intern and participant in the young adult group, reflected on this overlap by articulating, “If you have a good group of seminarians at your church, it’s a feeder to attract other young adults. What a way to kick-start a young adult ministry by putting ‘muscle’ behind working with young religious leaders! I think it would be a lot harder to build a young adult group without this.”

Since seven individuals are identified as seminarian Members in Discernment, this translates to roughly 20 to 25 percent of the total young adult group. The 75 to 80 percent of the young adults who are not seminarians fall into three other categories: other graduate students, spouses of graduate students/seminarians, and single working professionals. A few individuals are enrolled in masters programs at various schools in

the Atlanta area, with individuals working toward degrees in social work, nursing, teaching, or liberal arts. Davis said, “There are no business or engineering students.” The spouses of these students (if they have spouses or partners) tend to have entry- or mid-level professional positions in their chosen fields of training such as IT or teaching. The single working professionals hold similar positions.

The church is still growing and the young adult group is not a fully structured program, so it is most common that young adults have participated in the overall life of the church and have served in the places of leadership that the church offers and cultivates. One young individual served as the coordinator for KUCC’s Mission 4/1 Earth initiative, many regularly lead various aspects of worship and also preach (usually seminarians), some facilitate or participate in small groups and Bible studies, and some create their own projects and initiatives within the church and community depending on their passions.

This spirit of leadership and participation is not exclusive to the seminarians in the group, either. Young adults are present throughout all programs and activities of the congregation and are incorporated into the whole life of the church in this way. One male in his early 30s remarked, “I co-lead a weekly Bible study. My graduate degree is in English, but Susannah thought that my attention to literary criticism would be a gift for the group. I have to say that I’ve really enjoyed helping to lead the study.”

Because young adults intentionally occupy many different leadership positions and participate in all activities of the church, they have also developed intergenerational relationships at KUCC. Flowers said this: “When I was at [another church] in Atlanta, they were much more established. But it was also kind of like the young adults were their own group and were not integrated with the whole church. KUCC is the opposite of that church. You want integration. We [young adults] are part of the church—it is a different kind of community here.” According to Davis, some of the older adults have also taken some young adults “under their wing” and have invited them out to meals, drinks, or over to their homes.

Budget and Finances

Because KUCC is a new congregation, there is no designated budget for young adult ministries in particular. However, if a need arises and it is reasonable financially, it would be possible for the group to request and receive funding. At this point, all activities have been paid for individually; and they have intentionally held gatherings that are low cost to both the individual and the group. Mary Kathryn Tippet, coordinator of the young adult group and a working professional stated: “For now, we are just looking for fun social activities that don’t cost much. We’ve talked about hiking, going out for beer, etc. I really think you have to start it out as a social group to get people involved, and then you can build from there.”

Underlying Philosophy/Theology

While an underlying philosophy/theology for young adult ministry has not been specifically developed, the overall values and principles that support and guide KUCC in general are deeply integral to the structure and approach of the young adult community within the church. This philosophy/theology includes the following themes.

1. *Worship. Love. Serve.* These three words undergird all ministries, activities, and relationships of the church, particularly as they are related to the physical commitment of the congregation to be present and serve the neighborhood of Kirkwood and surrounding areas.

2. *Everyone. Everyone. Everyone!* This highlights the full inclusion of all persons into the life of the church. KUCC has embraced the motto of the denomination that, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” This has also translated into a *sense of belonging* that young adults expressed as being present in the church community.

3. *Authenticity.* One of the guiding belief statements on KUCC’s website is, “We believe that we are called to be real, honest, and authentic.” This is the single most important theme that leaders and young adults articulated as a core value of the ministry. Anna offered some poignant thoughts about this value: “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. Susannah 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. The other new, hip church in our area, Resonate, has a website that looks like a night club. It’s so slick—we are trying something different here. My brother-in-law came to this church when he was living with us—he has lots of drug issues—but he was moved by this child who is blind and disabled but is free to play music with the worship group. He came home with us and said that that is how church is supposed to be.”

4. *Faithfulness and flexibility.* The congregation and the leadership are committed to making the church work for the people, not the other way around, according to Susannah. Their philosophy of “church is not a business” opens new possibilities for creativity and meeting the needs of the church and local community in ways that more established churches may not be able to do.

Key Dynamics for Success with Young Adults

Several dynamics were identified in the course of conversations, interviews, and focus groups with young adults and church leaders that were central to the overall success of this ministry within the congregation. Some of these dynamics overlapped with the underlying philosophes of KUCC. Below are brief descriptions of these themes, along with excerpts of conversations with several young adults in the church.

1. Sense of openness / welcome / inclusion / belonging: One element that is clear from talking with people at KUCC is that they feel welcomed and comfortable, regardless of their backgrounds and experiences. They appreciate the explicitness of this message and the ways in which inclusion is practiced throughout the life of the congregation. This translates into individuals feeling a sense of belonging (and ownership) within the community. One young adult remarked: “I get a consistent message from the congregation and Susannah. I grew up Methodist and was looking for a church, but the messages at other churches were always mixed—the pastor would be welcoming, but the people non-welcoming...or vice versa. This is especially true as a gay person. One pastor just assumed my partner and I were sisters, and they wouldn’t believe otherwise.” A newcomer to KUCC and the young adult group emphasized this dynamic: “I’ve been looking for a church for three years, and this is only my fourth time at KUCC. Each time, someone has spoken to me. That’s huge!”

This sense of welcome and openness not only extends to sexuality, but also to openness regarding theological commitments: “I’ve been trying to figure out who I am as an adult and hadn’t been in a church in three years. But my first week at Kirkwood, I felt it was a place where everyone is welcome and I can be questioning. And if I wanted guidance—which I don’t right now—it would be there.” Another young adult mentioned, “Having the kind of openness to people along the faith spectrum—for example, the different covenants and faith memberships—is a huge draw. It also allows a lot of couples who are in different places in their faith journeys to be here.”

This does not mean, however, that openness to individuals of different sexual orientations and identities isn’t important for young adults. One seminarian said, “For me a church has to be Open and Affirming. It matters to my husband too. KUCC is a place where I can bring my sister and her girlfriend. And it matters in the city of Atlanta.” (“Open and Affirming” is the designation for churches in the United Church of Christ that choose to be welcoming of all persons, particularly LGBT persons.) One young woman also shared that “as a Republican, I’m not defined by this at KUCC. I don’t feel shunned because of it. You are part of the group here.”

2. Commitment to authenticity / honesty / realness: As one of the other main dynamics that has contributed to the overall success of KUCC and the young adult growth within the congregation, the commitment to authenticity is reflected throughout all practices and interactions. As plainly articulated by one young seminarian, “I like that we drink at Easter brunch—it’s honest, and we’re not pretending. It’s not dress-up.”

Anna Flowers, the current intern at KUCC, talked about the ways in which other communities in the area are not as authentic and honest in their messaging and approach as KUCC: “I have many anecdotes of other young progressive Christians who find themselves at very conservative churches unbeknownst to them. There is a failure of communication and lack of transparency there. The atmosphere could be progressive culturally, but it is very conservative theologically and socially. They should be coming here.” This authenticity plays into KUCC’s commitment to inclusion and welcome as well, in order to meet people where they are in their own theological and life journeys. “I

don't have it all figured out, and it's a process," said one young adult male. "I don't know about this Jesus, but I know this community. The door is open to just come in, whoever you are. That's real and reflects where a lot of young adults are at." Another individual said, "A lot of churches have the 'gay' thing, and that's the one thing they're about. There's more to KUCC than that. It didn't need to be proclaimed because it is understood. I appreciated the authenticity in that." In terms of practice and messaging, it is evident that this theme is present throughout both elements.

3. Shared participation and ownership as intentional leadership development: Participants in the life of KUCC not only feel that they are welcomed and included in the community; they also feel a sense of ownership in the ministry and the outcomes of the congregation. There is a spirit of openness to co-creating the present and future mission and vision; and young adults in particular expressed that they feel their gifts are celebrated, nurtured, and utilized. One young woman remarked, "I love KUCC because the leadership and Susannah have always said, 'Come and create with me.' Everyone has a hand in what's going on. If you are into bikes or if you're good with kids, your skillset can be a part of the whole and you can contribute."

Another person reflected, "Over the years, I've watched ideas grow and develop into things people have ownership of. That's a huge gift. Instead of being told what to do and how to live, you can actually see your own gifts and philosophies about life develop."

This dynamic has been intentionally created by the leadership of the community. "When I first met with Susannah for coffee, she talked with me about how KUCC was a place where there was room for me to be who I am and to share my gifts with others while growing and serving at the same time," said one young adult.

Another young adult summarized this dynamic best by articulating, "With more traditional churches, you get swept into the work of doing church. Compared to how much effort other churches ask of you, it's nothing here. It's lean and mean. I throw my weight into something. It's not the maintenance of structures—it's co-creating and co-participating."

4. Charismatic leadership paired with purposeful relationship building: It is apparent that the leadership of Davis has been, and continues to be, a key dynamic in the growth and vitality of the congregation. In addition, Susannah's role in shaping and modeling the central philosophies of KUCC through the building of intentional relationships has greatly influenced young adults in the community and seminarian young adults in particular. One young woman said, "Susannah is a big reason I came at the beginning. The first time I came, she ran down the street to meet me after the service."

A young seminary student quipped, "The pastor matters a lot. We love Susannah, and we believe in the mission." May Kathryn, coordinator of the young adult group, said the following in regard to talking about the growth and vitality of the congregation: "Some of it has to do with Susannah, and she is a good role model for people. It takes a special person to start a new church."

One particular young female also talked about the long-standing relationship she has had with Davis. “When I was 12,” she said, “I was baptized by Susannah at a very conservative church where she was a pastor at the time. As a teen, I was always asking where Susannah was after she left that church. She did a funeral for a friend of my mom’s a couple of years ago; and I was so excited I had found her that I cried!”

A significant part of the charismatic leadership and purposeful relationship building has occurred through Davis and her partner’s use of their personal home, “the parsonage.” One young adult said, “Susan and Susannah host a lot at the parsonage. After Easter we had a brunch thing. Their dinner parties help us to intentionally meet other people. Susannah is very intentional about us meeting one another. Not a lot of other churches do this. Susannah plays ‘matchmaker’ for the people in the church to build relationships.”

5. Integration of young adults with the whole congregation / intergenerational interaction: While there is a group of young adults who have been gathering on and off for the past year, young adults ultimately see this group of peers as secondary to their presence and participation in the larger congregation. They value relationships with others in the church as much as relationships with their generational peers. A young adult male said, “We don’t want to be set up solely by our affinity group. It is intentional that KUCC is set up by what ministries people want to be a part of.” Another young person commented, “There are a lot of older couples that I look up to at KUCC—they give me positive examples of what it’s like to be in partnership with someone else.”

This type of intergenerational relating and fellowship is important for many young adults in the community, particularly because of the transient nature of this age group. “Not everyone will stay in Atlanta for a long time, which is common,” said one individual. “But I feel like it is a little bit of a family away from home. Older folks always pay for a drink or a meal when we go out, which is nice.” One young adult even suggested, “The 60-somethings should merge with us [the young adult group]!” (Bear in mind that, as noted above, only ten percent of this congregation is over 50.)

6. Focus on community-based ministry: Through Davis’s leadership, this dynamic has become an important factor for several of the young adults and their participation in the activities of KUCC. “The grounding of the church within the community is important,” responded one young woman. “It’s not separate from the space in which it exists. Part of that is Susannah who knows and lives in the community; part of that is the congregation that cares for the community and people moving there to be a part of the place. Community is important to me. Lots of churches donate but don’t really know the community.” One couple even said, “We are moving to Kirkwood because of Susannah and the community.”

For these young adults, being a part of a ministry that is contextual possesses an element of authenticity and meaning for them. One individual stated, “We don’t even live in Kirkwood, but we stand behind the fact that this is a community ministry. It exists for

its locality. Localized ministry is what people my generation are looking for. If you are at all religious, the movement now is to make it local. We've looked to moving here, but it's not feasible for us."

7. Attractive online presence: While this particular factor may not be a central reason that young adults have remained at KUCC, it seems to be a dynamic that has drawn several young adults to the church in the first place. A young woman said, "The website attracted me the first time. It's a very good website. All of the events KUCC was involved in were there, and it was put together well and was informative." Another individual talked about how she came to learn about the church. "I had always been online looking at different churches; then Kirkwood UCC popped up on the web. There were no good places that were UCC in Atlanta, but this was different. I was kind of stalking KUCC online for a couple of months, then I came with my sister."

Because of the increased young adult presence and participation within the church, this population is also taking ownership of ways that KUCC can have a more engaging, technologically savvy presence online. For example, Anna has just launched a new online platform for the church called "The City." The goal of the platform is to share about church and community events and better connect people to one another. Flowers said, "Hopefully, it will also be a way that we attract more young adults to our community, as well as better connect the group that we have. I'm excited about trying this new way of interacting."

Broader Meaning and Generalizability of the KUCC Case

Kirkwood United Church of Christ possesses several characteristics that the overall Faith Communities Today (FACT) research identified as typical for churches with larger numbers of young adults. First, new congregations like KUCC that were formed recently are more likely to attract younger adults. As articulated in a recent FACT publication, "Those groups organized in 2000 or later are more than three times as likely to have an above-average number of young adults as those organized before 1976." (*Faith Communities Today Newsletter*, Issue 19, January 2013)

Second, KUCC is located in an urban neighborhood of Atlanta; and congregations with significant young adult populations are more than twice as likely located in urban or suburban areas as in small towns or rural areas.

Third, KUCC uses technology in fairly significant ways. As articulated by recent FACT research, "There is a clear correlation between use of technology by congregations and engaging with young adults. Nearly one in four of the congregations that make major use of new technology have exceptional numbers of young adults." (*Ibid.*) While KUCC may not always make major use of online technology in the ways that larger congregations have the resources to do, they are moving toward incorporating technology into the church's overall activities and relationships through implementation of "The City."

Fourth, KUCC has a number of programs and activities to engage young adults in their ministry, which is another similar characteristic of congregations identified in the FACT study.

And fifth, worship at KUCC, while possessing elements common to a traditional mainline Protestant order of worship, was executed in a contemporary style. The use of guitars and a drum, as well as projection equipment, were elements lifted up by FACT researchers as correlating more strongly with congregations with young adults.

There are also a few characteristics that make KUCC somewhat of a unique case when compared with congregations highlighted in the FACT research. The congregation is somewhat small with only 150 participants in total. According to FACT data, while there is not a strong relationship between the presence of young adults and larger congregations, there is a slight relationship between these two factors. It is important to note, however, that KUCC continues to grow in number; so this characteristic may change over time.

In addition, the presence of a solo full-time pastor at KUCC is unique for a growing presence of young adults, as “a solo full-time clergy leader is significantly less likely than two or more full-time clergy or no full-time clergy” to lead this type of congregation. (*Ibid.*) However, Davis’s direct connection with Candler School of Theology, as well as the close proximity of at least two seminaries to the church itself, counters this characteristic. In essence, KUCC might also be considered a multiple-staff church with the presence of interns, which most likely contributes to the significant growth in the young adult population as well.

Over and above these fairly quantifiable similarities and differences to FACT-identified churches, it is critical to stress the overall thematic dynamics that have contributed to KUCC’s success in attracting and retaining its young adult population. Several key dynamics are comparable to those highlighted in preliminary case study research conducted by FACT, some of which are as follows: (1) Experienced or charismatic leadership. (2) Casual informality; experimental and experiential quality. (3) Quality experiences, but not wanting an emphasis on quality to lead to inauthentic worship or prevent experimentation. (4) Participatory activity. (Chang)

These four dynamics found in other case studies to date are reflected in KUCC’s themes of a commitment to authenticity/honesty/realness, shared participation and ownership as intentional leadership development, and charismatic leadership paired with purposeful relationship building. Davis is both an experienced and charismatic leader of KUCC, and her commitment to creating an authentic community is soundly evidenced. In many ways, the casual informality experienced in other settings correlates to that sense of authenticity which KUCC emphasizes. The presence of experimentation and participatory activity correlates with the shared participation and ownership that Davis and others in the congregation invite people to explore in order to cultivate and utilize gifts for leadership development.

There are, however, a few key dynamics that this case study highlights which were not previously identified, but may be important elements in deepening an understanding of young adult ministry. First, cultivating openness, welcome, inclusion, and belonging in ministry for young adults is a critical factor in KUCC's success. This is translatable to other congregations, as increasing numbers of young people view religion in general, and church specifically, as simplistic and judgmental on issues of sexuality, exclusive, and unfriendly to doubters. (Barna) KUCC's consistency between its beliefs and practices of including "everyone, everyone, everyone" seems to be a defining dynamic for the retention and growth of the young adult population and the congregation as a whole.

Second, while there are some specific young adult activities in the church, integration of young adults with the whole congregation in intergenerational interaction seems to be an important dynamic that is contributing to KUCC's success. Rather than being seen as a demographic to be targeted, other congregations might focus energies articulating and carrying out the core philosophies of the church for the benefit of all members, but in ways that could also appeal to young adults' desires for authenticity/ informality and participatory activity. Because KUCC is a small but growing congregation, it does not possess the finances or the staff to underwrite and support ministries based on particular demographics. If the congregation were to gain those resources, however, it would alter that nature of the overall ministry. This dearth of resources could be good news for smaller congregations that want to attract young adults to their churches.

Third, KUCC's focus on community-based ministry reflects a desire for authenticity and connection in a different, but important way than other congregations might currently envision in their ministries. It also reflects the desire for participatory, experiential activity among young adults rather than a more traditional model of charity and programming that may be present in other churches and that may have been the practice among older generations within the church.

While no singular set of characteristics can determine increases in the presence of young adults in any congregation, Kirkwood United Church of Christ offers a model of ministry and engagement with younger adults that contributes to the scholarship and collection of best practices on the subject. It is the hope that some of the findings provided in this case study will be beneficial for those who are looking to include and invite this particular generation into their places of worship.

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