

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults **New Life Covenant Church, Chicago**

By Donna Lee Granville

New Life Covenant Church (NLC) was founded in September of 2003 under the leadership of Pastor John F. Hannah. Beginning only with weekly Bible studies and a small committed group of followers, in less than a year NLC began holding weekly Sunday services as their numbers grew quickly. Just four short years later, in October of 2008, NLC's rapid growth led to the purchasing of its first building, The Tabernacle, located in the Grand Crossing neighborhood, a predominantly African American middle class neighborhood on Chicago's Southside. However, that move was short-lived as New Life soon outgrew its facilities and began holding two services at 10 am and 1pm at the University of Illinois-Chicago forum at the intersection of Roosevelt and Halsted streets. Now in 2012, NLC has once again outgrown its facilities with the 3,000 person capacity of UIC forum being met and exceeded at both services nearly every Sunday. In fact, for special services such as Easter Sunday and New Year's, New Life holds its services at Chicago State University solely to accommodate its membership.

To meet its need for new facilities, NLC has, at this writing, purchased land and begun the process of building a new church campus. However, in the meantime, NLC is considering adding additional Sunday services, bringing its total to four meeting times in two different locations. NLC's exponential growth is such that despite its relatively young age, it is already being considered a megachurch in the city of Chicago. In addition, New Life streams its Sunday services, Bible study and twice-monthly prayer meetings online, further broadening the scope and reach of its ministry. While NLC does not specifically endorse a denomination, its parent church, also called New Life Covenant, is affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination, whose four-fold mission is to "evangelize the lost, worship God, disciple believers, and show compassion." (Assemblies of God website)

A typical Sunday at New Life Covenant includes three services held at two different locations: an 8 a.m. service at the Tabernacle, and 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. services at the UIC forum. Services at NLC typically last between an hour-and-a-half to two hours, with very few times when a service goes over the two-hour mark. At the services held at the UIC forum, seating is almost always at capacity, with ushers serving the necessary role of aiding congregants in finding seating in the main hall and if necessary in the overflow rooms. Similarly, weekly Thursday night Bible studies and twice monthly Tuesday morning prayer meetings also adhere to the one-and-a-half to two-hour time frame. Though NLC's vision is to be a multicultural ministry, its congregation is overwhelmingly Black/African American with a small percentage of members of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, services take place in English and as yet there are no accommodations for the deaf or hearing-impaired. However, the congregation is diverse in other ways, with various arrangements of couples, families and friends, the young, the old and the in-between.

Over the course of New Life Covenant's nine-year existence, a characterizing feature of its ministry has been its rapid growth. This growth has often been surprising for both insiders and outsiders. Pastor Hannah has told the story of other pastors whose reaction to NLC's rapid increase in numbers has been to say "it will slow down soon." Yet, NLC's numbers show no signs of slowing down.

A very visible and important demographic group in NLC's growing numbers is the youth and young adult population. In place of statistical information from the specific ministries that cater to this population within New Life Covenant, estimates of the size of this population are drawn from observations of Sunday services. For example, NLC potentially adds many new members to its congregation through the altar call which takes place at the end of each service. While the number of people who respond to the altar call fluctuates from service to service and can range in number from 40 to over a 100 people, 18- to 29-year-olds often make up half if not more of the new additions to NLC. Some of these may be new believers who will become new members.

Similarly, in a typical New Life Sunday service the youth and young adult population, though perhaps not quite at the 50% mark, is very visible and seems to comprise between 25-35% of those in attendance. Furthermore, if altar calls are any indication, the 18- to 29-year-old population is drawn to the way in which New Life Covenant presents the gospel of Christ. New Life's numbers are impressive in light of research that indicates African-American youth and young adults under the age of 30 are less likely to be religiously affiliated in comparison to African-Americans age 50 and older. (Saghal and Smith)

How, then, is NLC able to successfully recruit, retain, and engage the African -American youth and young adult population? While there is no one factor that has solely determined NLC's success with youth, there does seem to be an overarching philosophy of action that directly impacts the way in which youth and young adults receive NLC and the programs and activities that NLC designates for this particular group. According to the NLC website, its vision is to be, "A multicultural, family-oriented and cutting-edge ministry known by its dynamic worship, excellence in management and operations, Christ-like character of its members and life-changing compassion for people of all backgrounds." (NLC website) An important part of this vision is the goal of showing "life changing compassion" regardless of background, to all who enter New Life's doors.

Those sentiments are echoed by Pastor Hannah in an interview done in September of 2010. When discussing the rapid growth experienced by New life Covenant, Pastor Hannah asserts that "I love God and I love his people, sheep are not stupid—they know when people care about them." (Rolfe 2010) In that same interview Pastor Hannah makes it plain that New Life Covenant is a church that sees itself as ministering specifically to the unsaved and the unchurched. According to Pastor Hannah, "Churches swap members ... but I tell my members don't bring me your cousin that's

saved, but bring me your unsaved cousin or aunt—we want the ones that don't go to church...bring me the ones that are lost.” (Rolfe 2010) Bringing in the unchurched is accomplished through New Life's outreach efforts that take place primarily in the Grand Crossing neighborhood where the Tabernacle is located. These outreach events include activities such as a back-to-school carnival or cleaning up and praying for the neighborhood.

The focus on showing compassion and relating to all people regardless of background and the emphasis on recruiting the unchurched in particular are important factors that seem to underlie all of NLC's programming and activities for youth and young adults. Often for this demographic group, church itself holds little to no relevance to the day-to-day lives they lead. However, at NLC there are more than a few examples within the programming and activities for youth and young adults that represent attempts to meet the needs of this group on a holistic level, not just spiritually.

One of the most visible manifestations of this is the way in which Sunday services are structured to be engaging through the incorporation of elements such as music and the use of the arts and drama. A typical Sunday morning worship service at NLC begins with the praise and worship team and band that play a mix of different musical styles including contemporary Christian rock, gospel and hip hop songs. Much like a concert, the mood is set with dimmed overhead lights, special strobe lights on the stage, and an area cleared directly in front of the stage for members to dance and sing along to the praise and worship portion of the service. In addition to the praise and worship team, the NLC dance team also occupies a place on the stage with a team of approximately 10 to 20 dancers accompanying the singers and musicians. Dance and music are not the only arts used during Sunday services. Often Pastor Hannah's sermons themselves are presented not only in words through his preaching but also through other visual aids. Some examples include the use of spoken word in conveying a message on sexual purity and the use of dramatic vignettes to convey a message about the perils of surrounding oneself with the wrong people. Technology also plays an important role as scriptures are displayed on wide-screen projectors and even announcements are done in the style of commercials complete with NLC television correspondents.

Along with the music, worship style, and the integration of the arts and technology, NLC is also attractive to youth and young adults because of its extremely charismatic founding pastor, John F. Hannah. As already mentioned, Pastor Hannah's sermons are often dynamic in nature because of the emphasis placed on providing visual aids that bring to life his words and scriptures in real, relevant, and relational ways. In addition, Pastor Hannah shares personal anecdotes and stories that highlight the ways in which his personal relationship with God has not only matured over time but also influences how he lives his life daily. Stories from the pulpit have included candid remarks about smoking marijuana, and even about fights and growing pains with his wife of 18 years. Through it all, Pastor Hannah manages to convey his message with a mixture of wit, humor, and refreshing honesty. Perhaps due to hosting his own morning radio show, he is also very in tune to pop culture and can casually refer to rappers or songs of the

moment, familiar to his hearers. According to Pastor Hannah, “People told me that God would never use me because I am too silly. So I walked around trying to be serious. God has used me and my comedy to use and reach people. God has his hands on my life and has chosen me to preach for this generation.” (Rolfe 2010) Perhaps Pastor Hannah is indeed right, because as a charismatic leader, he is an initial, if not primary, reason why youth and young adults, along with others regardless of their station in life, become attracted to New Life Covenant Church.

While the setup of services and the charisma of the senior pastor may initially aid in the recruitment of youth and young adults, what is that keeps them coming back for more? NLC attempts to meet that goal by offering a number of programs and ministries that specifically cater to the youth and young adult population. For youth ranging in age from early teens to late teens, the Identity teen ministry offers a number of programs designed to meet their specific needs. These programs range from those which cater to spiritual needs, such as classes on purity and the foundations of a Christian walk, to programs like the step team, dance, and praise teams that cater to other needs.

In addition to the various programs housed under the Identity ministry, each Friday a youth church service is held that promises to convey the gospel “in a fun, radical, real yet motivating way.” (NLC website) The full list of programs and activities housed under the Identity umbrella consists of the following: weekly Friday youth service, foundational class, purity class, identity athletics, a team of young prayer warriors that intercede for themselves and others, helping support teens throughout high school and preparing them for life after high school, Young Ladies of Light specifically for teen girls, Boyz 2 Men specifically for teen boys, the Pursue program that keeps track of teens to help provide support as necessary, Step team, Praise team, Spoken word/rap/DJ teams, and the 4HisGlory Human Video team.

For young adults who are above the age of 18, their participation in New Life Covenant Church is a bit harder to untangle as there are multiple programs with considerable overlap and as a result they share this population. The programs that cater to young adults include the Singles Power of 1 ministry that aims to teach singles to develop an intimate one-on-one relationship with God; principles for Christian dating and tips for marriage preparation; the Love Sister 2 Sister ministry that provides support and encouragement for women regardless of age or position in life; the Iron Sharpens Iron men’s ministry that ministers to men regardless of age; and the New Life Connect Three College support group for students enrolled at all levels of higher education.

Thus, for older young adults the programming and activities offered at New Life are specific to the particular needs of that young adult. For example, a 25-year-old graduate student might find the Singles Power of 1 ministry more suitable than the college support group. In a similar vein, a 29-year-old working male might find more of his needs met by the Iron Sharpens Iron ministry, and for those who are married, the One Flesh marriage ministry might be more fitting than others. These programs provide this

age group with multiple choices to determine which programs and activities might be most beneficial to their lives.

Along with the monthly fellowships held by each individual ministry, there are also many opportunities for those interested to serve on various committees that deal with the arts and drama, publicity and media, or outreach and service projects. Activities such as Prayer on the Nine and Clean the Green invite youth and young adults to take active service roles in the community. These activities are designed to show that life within a Christian context does not have to lack excitement or always be religious in nature. For example, for Valentine's Day, the Power of 1 Singles ministry hosted its own event at a hotel in the city, complete with secular music and a DJ.

In summary, there are a multitude of ways in which New Life Covenant provides youth and young adults with opportunities to get exactly what they need according to their particular position or station in life.

Why Is This Ministry Effective?

NLC seems to be successful in recruiting, retaining, and engaging their youth and young adults for three key reasons. First, their philosophy of action is one that focuses on bringing in the unchurched and showing them "life-changing compassion" regardless of their backgrounds. NLC's various outreach and service projects are manifestations of its goal to go after the lost and introduce them to Christ. While this focus is perhaps in many ways not particularly unique, it might be especially successful with the youth and young adult population who often see churches and their congregations as places for judgment and chastisement rather than compassion.

Second, the charismatic leadership of Pastor Hannah attracts youth and young adults due to his ability to relate personally though preaching to an audience of thousands. Pastor Hannah's honesty about his own experiences along his Christian walk and his willingness to share moments of failure and succumbing to temptation add to his likeability and ability to relate to youth and young adults. In addition, his sermons are engaging and dynamic and his use of visual aids ensure that his message, whether it be on sexual purity or lessons from the life of David, is driven home and made relevant for his congregants' day-to-day lives.

Third, NLC offers a wide array of diverse programs, activities, and ministries for youth and young adults that provide this population with opportunities to get what they need spiritually and in other ways as well. In their 2005 book, *The Hip Hop Church*, authors Smith and Jackson contend that, "in some ways youth and young adults can feel like second-class citizens in the church, sitting in the back of the church while the adults 'get their praise on.' ... When youth are recognized, it is because they are serving in the youth choir, youth usher board, or youth council---merely mimicking adults and their behavior in the church." (Smith & Jackson 2005:41) Where NLC attempts to prevent this from happening is by offering the youth and young adult population with tailored choices

that allow them to determine how they will participate according to their own position in life.

Today, churches in general and perhaps largely black churches in particular, can no longer take for granted the role they have historically played in the lives of families and youth and young adults. There is a growing number of unchurched and unsaved individuals even within the historically religious African-American community. How churches respond to this population, especially youth and young adults, will determine the role of church and religion at large in generations to come.

Despite claims that many young people within the United States are largely alienated from religion, within the African-American community religion still remains an important authority in the lives of youth and young adults. Research on adolescents' participation finds that in comparison to other racial groups, African-American adolescents attend church more regularly, pray more regularly, are more likely to be a part of a church youth group, and claim religion to be a very important part of their lives. (Smith et al. 2002) Among the under 30 crowd, an overwhelming 81% of those who claim affiliation with historically black Protestant churches maintain that religion is an important factor in their lives. (Pond, Smith & Clement 2010)

However, this is changing. Research on the millennial generation (those born after the year 1980) suggests a growing generational gap as young adults attend church services less frequently, are less likely to name religion as an important factor in their lives when compared to their elders (Pond, Smith & Clement 2010). Among African-Americans under age 30, 19% report being unaffiliated with religion in comparison to just 7% of African Americans aged 50 and older. (Saghal & Smith 2008)

These statistics raise important concerns about the future of the black church and its influence on youth and young adults. While the level of religious involvement for African-American youth and young adults remains high, there is a growing generational divide between youth and older generations. In the article "Inner-city Black Churches Struggle to Blend Youth, Tradition," journalist David Briggs follows one inner-city Cleveland congregation in its attempt to close the generational gap in part by relaxing dress codes, incorporating technology, and tweaking music style. "What gives the issue of music a special urgency, church observers say, is that one can no longer count on succeeding generations to come through church doors." (Briggs 2008) NLC has seemingly taken notice and follows suit in its relaxed dress codes, music and worship style and use of technology.

In their seminal work, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) find that the primary reasons most youth and young adults leave the black church are due to a lack of relevant church programs and the absence of meaningful ways for youth to engage in church activities. (Lincoln & Mamiya 327) Thus, NLC's focus on offering programming and activities for the youth and young adult

population to be engaged is an important approach to ensuring the continued relevancy of church for a seemingly disengaged or disengaging generation.

However, most important of the aforementioned three reasons is the focus on bringing in new people and showing them compassion. The idea that the black (or any) church can no longer count on generations of families to come through the doors is important when considering the future of the church. Youth and young adults are an important demographic for membership continuity as they in turn grow up and raise families in and through the church. Consequently, for churches, mosques, synagogues and other religious institutions to survive, they must concern themselves with ensuring that younger generations continue to see the relevance of religious participation and involvement in their lives. NLC is but one example of a church that is willing to find the seekers, the unchurched, and the lost among the youth and young adult population, to bring them into the fold under the leadership of compassionate shepherds, and to provide them with opportunities to see the relevance and benefits of Christianity and church participation in their lived experiences.

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Identity Teen Ministry Spoken word:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8S_KmQQubl&feature=relmfu

Identity Teen Ministry Praise and Worship Team:

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