

Reaching out to young adults will screw up your church

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I have a theory about young adults and the church. Here it goes. Let me know what you think.

*While many churches say “we want young people” they don’t really. If young adults actually showed up and joined their church for good, the change they’d naturally bring with them would be stark, even off-putting. In fact, making a congregation welcoming for young adults necessarily means it will become less comfortable for the current members.*

It’s just a theory, but here’s why I’m suggesting it. A few stories...

First story: the ministry I lead hosts a book group that meets in a back room at a local coffee shop. We read books related to religion in a very open-minded atmosphere. Few of our book group members attend church. Some don’t believe in God. Most are highly suspicious of organized religion. Well, at a book group discussion recently conversation turned to why people don’t go to church and one of the members exclaimed, “Wait a second...this, this book group — it’s sort of like church! I mean, I’d *never* go to church, but this community reminds me a lot of one. Wow.” He was floored.

As many have noted about young adults today, we tend to seek belonging first; believing comes later. To welcome young adults churches need to make places where we can belong and then believe. Belonging takes time and often happens best outside the church’s walls. For churches to do this means, for many of them, major change in where, how, and for whom they program.

Second story (or stories, really). Several of my young adult pastor friends tell about a time when one of them is hanging out around town, meeting new people, just being his cool/nerdy self when someone finds out he’s a pastor. And this person thinks the pastor is pretty hip so she asks, “Hey, can I come to your church.” The pastor sighs and says, “Yes, but you’ve got to know: I’m really different at church.”

These pastor friends, to survive in their parishes, have taken the edge off their preaching, their politics, their big ideas, even their theology. Though the pastors know young adults are drawn to their edgy honest selves, they also know their more established members — with the power and the checkbooks — have other ideas. A lot would need to change for the pastor to be able to respond to his friend saying, “Yes! Please, come to my church. You’d love it!” And, if that gal at the bar would truly love it, what would the church’s choir members think?

Third story. I was once at a church-related event where young adults were going around the table introducing themselves to the group. One person shared his name and then said, “And, I want to be upfront: I’m an atheist.” For a second, I held my breath to see what would happen next. Quickly, someone said, “Great!” And another smiled and said, “So glad you’re here.” There were smiles all the way around the table.

I can’t help but wonder how many congregations would welcome that young atheist with a genuine smile rather than a leeriness that he might infect the confirmation class with dastardly atheism-laced questions. Welcoming young adults that fit the perfect church visitor mold is easy. You know the type church members long for: some magical newcomer who was raised in a perfect household, is married (not divorced), has a few kids, enjoys his well-paying job, and, of course, has orthodox unquestioning beliefs. Fewer and fewer young adults fit this image (if anyone ever did). To welcome young adults these days churches need to welcome the atheist, the single mom, the tattooed, the unemployed, and yes (of course!) even the same-sex couple.

Those are my stories. And that’s my theory: for most congregations to truly become welcoming for young adults they will necessarily need to unsettle current members. Discuss.

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