After the Baby Boomers

reviewed by Brian D. McLaren in the October 16, 2007 issue

In Review

After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion

Robert Wuthnow
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A wise friend of mine says, “The plural of *anecdote* is not *data*.” Robert Wuthnow would agree. He brings the eye of the sociologist to the life of the church and gives us insights that sometimes confirm but often confound our anecdotes. In *After the Baby Boomers*, he examines data about adults between the ages of 21 and 45 and concludes, “If I were a religious leader, I would be troubled by the facts and figures currently describing the lives of young Americans, their involvement in congregations, and their spiritual practices.”

As he conveys large doses of data (along with a few anecdotes), Wuthnow keeps reminding readers not to hastily draw conclusions “from where the action is” but rather to reach their conclusions on the basis of “a full consideration of where the action is not.” He goes on to say that “social reality is . . . complicated,” and “we need a more sophisticated view of society if we are going to understand why American religion is patterned as it is.”

I recently completed 24 rewarding and challenging years of leading what Wuthnow would describe as a youthful congregation. Over the past several years I’ve also been traveling extensively in North America and around the world, trying to understand the sweeping changes in our culture and world and to articulate what they mean for the church. What I’ve seen in hundreds of churches in dozens of denominations often causes me to wonder whether congregations as we know them can survive.

Wuthnow anticipates the disquiet many of us feel: “My view is that congregations can survive, but only if religious leaders roll up their sleeves and pay considerably more attention to young adults than they have been.” Always one to qualify, he adds: “We should not ignore the possibility that congregations will survive from sheer inertia. . . . But survival and vitality are two different things. The question is not whether congregations have a future, but what the future of congregations will be.”

For people like me who have been focused on the philosophical and cultural changes associated with terms like *postmodern*, *postcolonial* and *posttypographical*, Wuthnow’s findings about the religious lives of younger adults are neither contradictory nor corraborative. They simply come from another angle, and in that way they are complementary. If you asked me to boil them down into a few sound bites, I’d begin by reviewing what Wuthnow says about changes relating to family

life.

Young adults are marrying later, having fewer children and having them later, moving more often, going to college in higher numbers, living with more immigrant neighbors and therefore more ethnic and religious diversity, and living in the suburbs even more than their baby boomer parents. “The net result,” Wuthnow says, “is fewer young adults contributing to the activities of local congregations or receiving support from these congregations.” If one turns the book’s subtitle into a question—How are 20- and 30-somethings shaping the future of American religion?—the simple answer may be, “By staying away.”

The biggest single social factor related to declining church attendance among younger adults is not TV, the Internet, increasing skepticism regarding Christian orthodoxy or the specter of “secular humanism” or “relativism.” No, Wuthnow says, “being married or unmarried has a stronger effect on church attendance than anything else. . . . Children also make some difference. . . . This means that the postponement of marriage and children continues to suppress church attendance at least until adults are in their early forties.”

“Ah,” some overtired pastors may be saying. “Good. Leave them alone in their 20s and 30s, and they’ll come home in their 40s, bringing their toddlers behind them.” But that would be a conclusion of delusion—especially for mainline Protestants, but also for evangelicals. Since the early 1970s retention rates for both mainline and evangelical Protestants have fallen, so that as a proportion of the U.S. population neither group—contrary to popular opinion—has been growing, and this is especially true among younger adults.

Most of the mainline decline occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, Wuthnow explains, and it seems to have leveled out in the 1990s. Still, Wuthnow cautions, “the diminishing numbers of younger adults affiliated with mainline denominations is a significant aspect of American religion and one that does not bode well for the future of those denominations.” With the average adult age of mainline congregations 52 and of evangelical congregations 48, the loss of young adults, especially those in their 20s, is indeed cause for alarm. The only groups receiving some consolation from the statistics are Catholics, Jews and black Protestants, whose percentages of young adult affiliates “have remained remarkably stable.”

That numerical dominance has shifted from mainline to evangelical congregations is no surprise. In 1970 the ratio of mainliners to evangelicals was five to four, and in 2000 it was two to three. Wuthnow concludes that while both groups have faced the same social changes, “evangelicals have simply adapted better.”

However, contrary to expectations, evangelical growth can’t be attributed to mainline decline; the former aren’t growing at the expense of the latter. Whereas in 1970, 12 percent of younger evangelicals had been raised as mainliners, now only 9 percent were raised in the mainline. The data show that more recent evangelical growth among young adults comes from Roman Catholics crossing over. Now 9 percent of younger evangelicals were raised Catholic, compared to 4 percent in 1970.

Evangelicals won’t find much reason for smugness in this data. If anything, mainliners’ future may be their own. Much of the evangelical advantage of the past 30 years, it turns out, can be attributed to sociological factors like higher birth rates, lower college education rates and a tendency to stay rooted in the communities where they were raised.

The data confirm that those of us who have been focusing on the spiritual needs of unchurched people have been doing work that is increasingly important. “The most notable of all these figures,” Wuthnow writes, “is the large increase in the proportion of younger adults who are nonaffiliated. That proportion has risen in the space of a generation from one person in eleven to one person in five.”

But beyond the one in five who are unaffiliated, many of the affiliated are not attending church as often. For example, while 46 percent of people in their early 40s attend church weekly; only 29 percent of people in their 20s do. As a result, even though 80 percent have some kind of affiliation with a church or religious community, 55 percent are unchurched in the sense of being uninvolved in a church.

On the other hand, “the proportion who talk about religion with their friends is highest among young adults in their twenties,” which tells us that their lack of church involvement is not a sign that they are oblivious of spiritual concerns. Although younger adults tend to engage in cognitive bargaining and tinkering—piecing together bits and fragments from different theological resources—Wuthnow reports that “core beliefs . . . have remained remarkably pervasive and stable” over the past 30 years. Some will be surprised to learn that

rates of orthodoxy are higher for those with a college education than for those without.

So younger adults, it turns out, are surprisingly interested in spirituality and are sympathetic to essential Christian doctrine. About 38 percent lean conservative religiously (with 20 percent being staunchly conservative), but a hefty 56 percent lean liberal religiously. The challenge for liberals in the mainline is to turn a generalized liberal leaning into a passion for a broader religious mission and active engagement with the church: while 56 percent of religious conservatives attend church weekly, only 14 percent of liberals do.

Again, if evangelicals begin congratulating themselves at this point, they should pay attention to one other way that they excel in Wuthnow's data: in being unwelcoming toward Asians and Hispanics. The odds of being unwelcoming "are about 1.7 times greater among evangelicals than among nonevangelicals," Wuthnow reports, and "evangelicals are a more likely source of mobilized resistance against newcomers than any other religious group."

This unhappy association between active church involvement among evangelicals and a lack of hospitality toward "the other" raises an important question: "As the United States becomes a more ethnically diverse society, will churches be a way in which young adults participate in this diversity, or will churches function, as they often have in the past, to shield young adults from diversity—insulating them, as it were, inside their own religioethnic enclaves?"

Christian leaders who are ready for change will not find a prescription or program in *After the Baby Boomers*. What they will find is a challenge to think more broadly about the future of the church, assisted by a leading sociologist's analysis of current trends. And they will find something else: a sympathetic voice speaking on behalf of young adults who are highly interested in God, highly in need of guidance and support, highly networked and networkable, highly available to be equipped for vital mission, and largely uninspired by what churches are currently doing.

What should churches start doing, given Wuthnow's findings? My answer would be that they should redistribute energy. When we think of all the time and energy that churches invest in children, youth and their parents, and when we think of the high level of clout exercised by senior church members, it's clear that young adults are being left out or left behind. This is tragic for the church because it means that the

substantial investment in children and youth is too often allowed to be lost when they graduate high school. And it’s tragic for the young adults because during the years when they make their biggest life-shaping decisions, they’re outside the church’s circle of influence and support.

To redistribute energy on behalf of young adults will require three things. First, we need to listen to young adults—those in the church and those outside. How about a few listening dinners or listening parties where pastors and lay leaders ask good questions of young adults and then listen, without judgment or defense? We also need to listen to those who are doing effective ministry with young adults—networks like emergentvillage.com (and its denominational affiliates) and leaders like Karen Ward, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, Tim Keel, Rob Bell and Shane Claiborne. What you hear from them will unsettle and disturb you, but if you keep listening a little longer, you’ll be inspired.

And third, we should increase dialogue between church leaders and people working with young adults in Christian colleges and in ministries on secular college campuses. These are people who rub elbows with young adults day to day, and they have a lot of good advice to offer local churches, but hardly anybody asks. These kinds of listening and learning will begin to change us as church leaders, and from our personal change, the other needed changes will flow.

Recalling Jesus’ words about a plentiful harvest and a dearth of workers, and having been bathed in the data for over 230 well-written pages, I find myself even more eager to be part of the solution to the problems raised by Wuthnow. Much is at stake.