

Motivations for Young Adult Ministry

by David G. Berube

The Church is a complex organism made up of many different and distinct groups of people. One group that has received a considerable amount of attention in recent years is Young Adults. This is the section of our population between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five (approximately) which, on the whole, is not a statistically dominant group in our congregations. In fact, the Barna Institute found that the median age of the fifty-five million Americans classified as “unchurched” is thirty-five (Never On A Sunday, Barna Research, 1990, p. 3).

Experts in church growth, pastors, lay leaders, regular church folks and others have speculated as to why younger adults are not in church, why we ought to be concerned, and what attracts and keeps them active in the places where they are present. As a pastor who also happens to be a younger adult, serving a church with a significant number of younger adults involved, I am interested in what motivates churches to reach out to my peers and how that translates into attitudes and behaviors. My perceptions here are based upon my own observations, as well as workshop, literary and seminar information, and informal conversations with pastors and lay persons in a variety of settings. I hope, at the very least, to contribute something useful to our collective thought and prayer about how we interact with the people under thirty-five whom Christ calls us to reach.

I believe there are five basic motivations that churches operate from as they seek to reach younger adults: Survival, Tokenism, Accommodation, Assimilation and Complete Compromise. A church might operate out of more than one motivation, sometimes simultaneously, but one of the five will tend to be the dominate impulse. These motivations do not seem to be intrinsically static, although they can become fixed, and even calcified, in churches where calcification is a corporate personality trait.

SURVIVAL

This motivator recognizes the need for younger adults in the congregation, primarily for what they can contribute to keeping the church from further decline and eventual death. It is an attitude that looks toward paying the bills, keeping a pastor, perhaps a little maintenance of the building, and not much else. The congregation that has Survival as its dominant motivator is not willing to change anything in order to attract, integrate, or hold onto younger adults. New people are simply a means to an end (or, more accurately, a means to avoiding an end). Survival affirms the age-old philosophy that newcomers ought to be here just because we are. Its voice can be heard to say, “They should be here. Our doors are open every week and we need them to keep those doors open. What we have is good enough for us and it should be good enough for them, too.” Survival motivation expects that younger adults will mold themselves to fit in with the existing congregation, and support its continuation in the form in which it currently exists.

In a church where Survival is primary, younger adults are expected to function somewhat like movie financiers and “extras.” The presence of younger adults in such a congregation is desired for their ability to provide money and warm background bodies that will give the core congregation a sense of comfort and success, along with the appearance of growth. Newcomers are not expected to put any pressure on the church to actually grow, except in worship attendance numbers and offering amounts. That is one of the major flaws in this mindset, because younger adults are not a group that stands out statistically as making a major financial impact in the Church. They also don’t tend to enjoy giving their time to the pursuit of simply being somewhere. Generally speaking, churches that exhibit this motivator and the behaviors associated with it have no younger adults, no understanding of why not, and a certain level of hostility toward them for their “lack of commitment.”

TOKENISM

This motivation is a little more flexible than the first. It recognizes that for younger adults to stay part of the congregation they need to be more than silent financial partners and worship extras. Tokenism accepts that younger adults are different, and that their differences need to be tolerated to some extent (not, however, accepted). The mindset of a congregation motivated by Tokenism will accommodate the needs of younger adults to a greater extent than the survivalists, and will seek to make younger adults feel reasonably comfortable by comparison. A nursery and Young Adult Sunday School class may be provided, for instance, even though their necessity isn't really understood. Tokenism seeks to have a small, comfortable group of relatively mainstream "young people" around, so that it can be ministering to this group that everybody says you should be reaching. The Tokenism-motivated congregation does not, however, want the size of that group or its demands to grow or change. If the type, number, or perceived demands of the younger adults get beyond what the dominant group will tolerate (in other words, beyond a token), some level of survivalism will rise up to herd the younger adults back into their cage.

In churches where Tokenism drives the machinery, younger adults are given a little more space to roam in, but are still seen more as a resource to be managed than partners in ministry. The problem with this motivation is that younger adults are still expected to give more than they take, and are often viewed as taking just a little too much. The pain of the effort to reach younger adults is obvious in the dominant adult group, as is their felt level of frustration and exasperation, even though they keep plugging away at their duty to reach this group. Younger adults are aware enough to sense this tension and smart enough to be uncomfortable with it. These churches may have periods where a relatively significant number of younger adults are around. Over time, however, they generally have a few fairly constant younger adults on the periphery, and the rest fade in and out.

ACCOMMODATION

This Young Adult Ministry Motivator is really a blend of a sincere desire to reach out and limited understanding of how to do that. Leaders in these churches have probably read at least one book or attended one seminar on reaching this population. These churches really try to accommodate younger adults, sometimes too hard. They change some substantial elements of their corporate life to indicate their sincerity, which may mean adding contemporary choruses to worship and limiting the amount of traditional ritual. Younger adults will also be invited to participate in worship leading and offered other leadership opportunities. Some resources of money and time will be committed to fellowship and other perceived needs of younger adults. The church seeking to accommodate younger adults has an attitude of genuine toleration for these whom they perceive as "one of our groups." Accommodation wants to make enough change for younger adults to feel comfortable, so that they will attend more often and become "part of the family." It expects that the younger adults will sense the amount of accommodation made for them and reciprocate with a certain amount of accommodation on their own part.

When a church is motivated primarily by Accommodation, the major hurdle encountered is awkwardness. The whole quest to reach younger adults winds up feeling forced, as the principles and ideas of the "experts" are often implemented without being examined against the reality of the particular setting. Another obstacle is that the leadership opportunities granted are often beyond the ability of time, skill, or knowledge of the chosen younger adults (many of us have no idea what the Christian Education committee is supposed to do). This makes the attempt feel like tokenism. The amount of change made by the church and the typically low results from the targeted younger adults often frustrates some of the mainstream congregation who then don't see why this accommodation is so necessary. The combination of these factors sends a confused message to younger adults. Because they are only marginally connected, they are hyper-sensitive to the perceived counterfeit outreach of the church, very aware of frustration over their ineffective leadership, and uncomfortable with much of what is designed to be "just for them." There are usually a good number of mildly active younger adults in Accommodation churches,

but they function mainly on the margins of church life. There are periods of mutual ineffectiveness and disillusionment for them and the church, but the main relationship becomes somewhat of a stand-off that they can't seem to get past. The younger adults in these congregations always seem a little unsure, a little apprehensive, and a little suspicious, and they don't seem to ever move to deeper levels of activity and commitment.

ASSIMILATION

This approach to ministry with Young Adults recognizes that several factors must come together for the outreach to be effective. It is not enough to seek younger adults, or find them, or give them something to do, or make them feel comfortable. If the church is to be effective it must do all of these things sincerely and simultaneously, and that also holds for any other group the church ministers with. Assimilating churches recognize that people are needed for many reasons in the church, from attendance and money to leadership and learning and personal spiritual growth. They recognize that some things might be done differently in order to make the group more comfortable. They also realize that if people are helped to fit in they will stay, thus making the church bigger and "different." Assimilating churches have, to a greater extent than others, counted the cost of reaching out and accepted the fact that if they do it right people will respond.

In Assimilation-motivated churches, younger adults function no differently than any other adults. They are, like other adults, invited, enabled and encouraged to minister and grow in keeping with how they have been gifted by God. Any and all positions are open to them according to the same qualification requirements that apply to other adults. They may suggest changes, advocate for new ministries, and seek leadership to the same extent as any other members of the family. These churches tend to have a significant number of younger adults around and their level of activity reflects that of the general adult population of the congregation. They also see a rise in the number of younger adults who come to "check things out" as they search for a church to call home. The general population is not threatened by the growing number of young adults because they do not see them as an isolated mass of a certain type of people. They have names, have developed relationships across age lines, and have begun to earn some respect in the church. In these churches, young adults are not seen as "taking over," but being allowed to blend in, which is a critical distinction to be made for a church that is seeking to reach any group effectively. Assimilation churches expect to compromise and change some in order to reach young adults, but also understand that change and compromise is a two-way street that the whole family must travel.

COMPLETE COMPROMISE

This motivation is, in many ways, coming full circle. It resembles Survival, although it has been de-clawed, so to speak. The sharp edge of Survival that sought to get younger adults for what they could give has here given way to being almost enslaved to them. It sounds something like this: "Younger adults are our most important constituency. We'll do anything and change everything in order to make them always feel totally comfortable and welcome here. We will not place any demands or pressure or expectations upon them because we really need them." Compromise churches will make themselves change in painful ways so that younger adults will feel good, even if other groups are made to feel bad in the process. They will totally revamp worship to the point that nothing familiar or traditional remains. They will exclude younger adults from feeling any pressure to contribute time, talent or treasures to the work of the Lord (in fact, to insure this, they won't mention any of the facets of stewardship or commitment).

In a church motivated by compromise, it isn't long before a breakdown begins. The church begins to wind down in whatever Christian zeal it had and starts to resemble a benign social club. Those older adults who remain (and many don't) bear the burdens of leading and financing the fading ministry and mission of the congregation. Younger adults are indulged in a setting like this and often given whatever they want. It creates a false reality of the church that inevitably waters down some of the essentials of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There may actually be some initial growth of the younger adult population in a congregation that has completely compromised in order to reach them. Over time, however, they will plateau in numbers and fade away out of boredom and the lack of challenges. This can happen with any group in the church that is totally catered to in this way, and what remains in the aftermath is a church drifting without direction, purpose or unity — hardly a church at all.

How does a church effectively reach out to younger adults with a healthy and effective motivation that aids faithful ministry? I offer the following suggestions as a starting place:

First, discern God's will for your congregation. What is the ministry that the Lord has specially gifted you for? What specific mission does God want you to excel at that no other church is called to in the same way? Once you have discovered what you are meant to be about, people will join you who share that vision.

Second, don't overemphasize younger adults or make them seem more important than any other group. The Lord chooses who will be in the church, and I believe the Lord wants a diverse Body with differing gifts, faith maturity and ages. If we approach all people and groups with the same sincere desire for them to join us on the journey of faith, those who are meant to be part of us will be, and we won't have to alienate everyone else in order to attract them.

Third, be willing for the whole congregation to grow and change in healthy ways. Healthy change is more than one group in the church growing while another gives up. Healthy change helps the whole church remain strong. Primary growth in one area inspires some kind of growth in all other areas. The nature of assimilation is that every group is able to celebrate and benefit from every other group's growth. The church becomes less and less about "we" and "they," and more and more about "us."

Finally, pray for healthy, sustained, effective growth. Always remember the potency of seeking the mind of the Lord. We have seen more happen in our setting when we simply lift our concerns and desires heavenward than when we spend inordinate amounts of time programming. Quality programs and planning are important, but the first priority is prayer.

I believe that there are younger adults out there whom God intends to be part of our congregations and who will respond to our invitation. I believe that we are called to reach them in the name of Christ and that it is meant to be joyful, fruitful work, rather than uninspired, unfulfilling duty. Checking our motivations is part of preparing for how we will accomplish that ministry in a spirit of excitement and celebration.