

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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September 2005

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Are We Connecting with the Opportunity Group?

Harry said, "Youth are the main thing. Strong youth program equals strong church."

Jane said, "Young-adult parents are the main thing. They bring their children and youth and build a strong church."

Which of those two statements is true?

Neither assertion is totally true. No *single ingredient* guarantees a strong, healthy church! Yet Jane's statement contains more truth than Harry's. Today's young-adult parents insist on quality children and youth ministries, *plus* meaningful participation for themselves.

Church sociologists call age-25-44 parents the "opportunity group" because this segment of American population is the most receptive to a spiritual connection with Jesus Christ.

What characteristics cause congregations to attract large numbers of young-adult parents? Observers often see the eighteen qualities listed below in such churches.

Gather a group of five or ten church members and/or attendees with birthdates between 1965 and 1985. Read these eighteen paragraphs, one at a time. Discuss these two questions:

- ◆ Is this quality present in our congregation?
- ◆ If this quality is weak, how can we strengthen it?

Warning: Age-25-44 parents know the answers to these questions. Few older adults, including governing board members, can accurately answer those two questions.

1. Excellent facilities and staff for infant care. In many instances, the nursery's appearance and the confidence the nursery staff inspires exert as much influence on whether first-time visitors return a second and third time as does the quality of what happens in the sanctuary. If the nursery fails to meet their expectations, they shop elsewhere.

2. Sensitivity and friendliness toward newcomers. Seventy percent of first-time visitors feel somewhat shy and ill at ease in this new place. Churches with effective greeters and a warm, friendly atmosphere that makes company feel welcome tend to have more company.

3. Worship music that connects with young adults. At least 75 percent of age-25-44 young adults prefer worship hymns that are slightly louder and more upbeat than did their parents. Congregations still repeating the 1955 hymn-

styles (no contemporary rhythms and praise songs) need not apply for ministry with the typical young-adult household.

4. Sermons that communicate what the Bible says about how to live a meaningful life. Young adults want to hear insights and illustrations from biblical characters that address the practicalities of daily living. While many young adults do not believe that all of the Bible's content is literally true, they affirm its authority—especially in family matters and as a guide to achieving better balance in a hectic life. They want to hear those messages from clergy who are *real*, who avoid portraying themselves as perfect. Young adults, by now exposed to more than a million TV and print ads, are seasoned skeptics of pretentious messages.

5. Spiritual experiences that draw people closer to God. This generation expects churches to help them connect with God, rather than merely connect with a nice social group and good Sunday school classes for their children.



6. Opportunities for positive interpersonal relationships. A study indicates that more Americans feel lonely than do people in any other country. Various kinds of small-group involvement feed that hunger which all young adults—particularly this generation of young adults—feel. Because many of them experienced the pain of broken relationships resulting from their parents’ divorces, they unconsciously or consciously seek healing in positive relationships with peers.

7. Discussion of life concerns and faith questions with other young adults. Not every young-adult church attendee wants to participate in a Sunday school class, a weeknight study group, or a recovery group, but approximately 40 percent of young adults do. More than any recent generation, today’s young adults want to connect with the love of God through the sense of community and intimacy that grows in a spiritually focused group.

8. A sense of belonging. Although members of this generation pride themselves on individualism, they want to belong. But unlike the 1950s generation, they do not necessarily define “belonging” as belonging to an institution. Rather, they want to belong to a group of people who genuinely include them in their circle. Pastors note that most young adults wait several months, and often more than a year, before adding the seal of official church membership to their worship attendance. Few members of this generation join in order to belong. They wait until they feel they belong; then they join.

9. Guidance with family issues. Today’s young parents understand that the opportunity to mold a child’s life is powerful and brief. Parenting-skill training is therefore a food that effective churches put on their cafeteria line.

10. Caring ministries that help people deal with various life stresses. Churches with numerous young adults tend to excel in friendliness, acceptance, and caring. Young adults want their congregation to be a caring place, not just a teaching space.

11. Efforts to help heal the hurts of people in the community outside the congregation. This generation wants to address practical issues and needs in their community. They are less excited about faraway mission endeavors (unless their hands-on experience on a mission trip or frequent communication from a mission that their church supports *personalizes* those needs).

12. Activities that recognize young-adult diversity. Young-adult parents are not all alike. Some are presently-single, previously-married young adults with children. Many are married young adults with children. Churches increase their chances of attracting young-adult parents when they program to address the needs of both groups.

13. A young-adult athletic program. Fitness, softball, volleyball, basketball, and golf opportunities meet several needs simultaneously: fitness, socializing, and entertainment.

14. Opportunities to make a difference. In the deep places of their soul, everyone asks, “Does my life make a

difference to anyone?” Churches with numerous young adults do not emphasize placing newcomers on a committee. Rather, most such churches invite new people to serve on ministry teams where they feel the concrete sense of accomplishment that comes from doing meaningful ministries, which churchgoers rarely feel in committee meetings.

15. Opportunities to lead. Not every newcomer wants a *leadership role* on a ministry team, a committee, or the governing board; but about 15 percent of newcomers find such roles essential to their sense of satisfaction in congregational life. Some churches block that type of young-adult participation with this unwritten rule: no one holds a significant leadership position until at least age fifty. Young adults get the message. They find other places in the community in which to invest their life energies.

16. Well-staffed nursery for all church meetings. Failure to employ nursery attendants for weekday functions sends a not-so-subtle signal: we do not want people with small children in our inner circle of leadership.

17. A more theologically conservative orientation than their parents and grandparents. Research reveals that, with a few notable exceptions, attendance totals are declining among the more liberal mainline denominations and growing in the more theologically conservative denominations. Congregations that are the most effective in offering Christ to young-adult parents usually wrap that gift in a more conservative biblical package than did the previous generation. That package includes greater emphasis on Bible study and prayer.

18. Organizational structures that stress equality and participatory democracy. Hierarchical leadership felt normal to the people who won World War II. Their children—the Baby Boomers—questioned, confronted, and argued with authority figures. Today’s young adults tend to silently skip doing what religious authority figures tell them they ought to do. They often ignore the authority handed down by governing boards and denominational leaders—by either (a) “doing it my way” or (b) going elsewhere to church. Therefore, church leaders who do not work hard at hearing their opinions through listening conferences, discussion forums, and surveys never do. Effective business leaders call these procedures “finding out what the customer values.” Effective church leaders call it “taking time to listen.”

The Bottom Line. Does our congregation contain numerous young-adult parents?

If the answer is yes, which of these eighteen factors contribute to that success?

If the answer is no, which of these eighteen factors should we strengthen?