

CHAPTER 6

Cultivating a New Generation of Christian Leaders

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Recently, the local Presbyterian church with which our campus ministry is in partnership sent an e-mail to one of our student staff assigned to that church, wondering, essentially, how their congregation could engage more young adults in its ministry. Overt in this question was the concern that the church was somehow not meeting the needs of young adults; covert was the panic about relevancy and sustainability and the possibility of inadequacy that the absence of young adults suggested. In my ten years as a campus minister related to this congregation, this was the third time this question has been put formally to us, the first two times as the part of the work of task forces dedicated to getting to the bottom of the question of “Where are the young adults?” The question has come up countless times informally. Of course, this is not a concern unique to Presbyterianism or this particular congregation. United Methodists, Episcopalians, and Lutherans, too, wonder and worry about the dearth of young adults in their local congregations and in the ranks of ordained clergy.

■ “Where Are the Young Adults?”

All too often, in fretting about why young adults are not engaged in large numbers in our local churches, the conclusion that “they’re just not interested” is drawn. While the belief that students’ religiosity generally tends to decline during their years in college is

documented empirically in some places,¹ so has their overall desire to engage spirituality, ask big questions, participate in communities of depth, and find purpose and meaning. In 2003, a multi-year research project conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, was begun to assess the spiritual desires and developments of undergraduate students. According to the HERI study, college students have “very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring the meaning and purpose of life.”² A 2007 study of more than 1,000 young adults, conducted by Lifeway Research, concluded that seven in ten Protestants, both mainline and evangelical, who went to church regularly in high school had quit attending by age twenty-three.³ However, the HERI study found that eight in ten students reported attending religious services during the past year. Furthermore, according to the HERI study, similar numbers say that they discussed religion with both friends and family, and more than two-thirds pray. Three-fourths say that they are “searching for meaning/purpose in life” and many are engaged in a spiritual quest, with nearly half reporting that they consider it “essential” or “very important” to seek opportunities to help them grow spiritually. At the same time, nearly half also say that they are “seeking,” “conflicted,” or “doubting.”⁴

These findings from the Lifeway study and the HERI study seem inconsistent. Yet, while both deal with the way young adults interface with religion, these studies are most likely measuring two different aspects of student experience. The Lifeway research is correct that what seems to decrease during the young adult years is *religiosity in a Christian context*, which can refer to activities such as regular worship attendance, daily religious practices such as prayer or devotional time, in the manner exhibited during one’s youth. However, the HERI study correctly notes that what seems to increase is the desire for *spirituality, meaning, and purpose more generally*—the need for an “owned” faith, a spirituality that is questioned, tested, and refined, as well as one that can provide truth and guidance in a complex, pluralistic environment.

■ Spiritual Needs and the Quest of Young Adults

In terms of faith development, it is entirely appropriate, and perhaps necessary, for young adults to leave familiar religious settings and explore new territory, where they feel the freedom to deconstruct their faith, asking questions they may not have felt previously permissible. As Steve Rankin points out in his essay in this volume, James Fowler, in his pioneering work on faith development, posits that individuals move through faith stages as they travel through life, transitioning to a more nuanced and deeper understanding of their faith, themselves, and the world as they grow and are confronted with new challenges. Individuals move from the undifferentiated faith of infancy to the imaginative faith of early childhood and then to the mythic-literal faith of childhood. These early transitions are largely brought on by the growing consciousness of a child as she ages. As individuals move into adolescence, they tend to exist in a peer-oriented, dependent stage of faith, where they

have assimilated the faith of their childhood. This stage of faith provides a deep sense of belonging. Transition out of this stage is often precipitated by a major event, such as leaving home, wherein an individual is confronted with questions to previous beliefs and is challenged to construct a faith that can be personally owned but still connects with the traditions and beliefs of the larger community. This is a critical time, and if there is no intention or attention to integration of faith, experience, and education, persons may become arrested in their development or lost to faith.⁵

Meaning-making grows in complexity as we age; and there are certainly many examples of persons whose faith development has been arrested at a stage of discerning what is real or what is not real, or at a stage of dependency, or simply in a place of doubt or confusion. If we are to form mature Christians who have chosen their faith freely, we must allow the possibility that these same persons would decide against participating in the religion of their childhood, at least for a time. Moreover, for persons to be alive to paradox—which is one of the hallmarks of a mature faith—we must affirm and make space for the reality of competing truth claims.

We are mistaken, however, if we believe that allowing space and freedom in a faith quest is all that is necessary for persons to come to a mature faith. Again, according to the Lifeway study, 34 percent of persons who had ceased attending regular worship by age twenty-three said they had not returned, even sporadically, by age thirty.⁶ In other words, contrary to the conventional wisdom that young adults essentially take a hiatus from engagement in a local congregation and return when their lives are less transient or when they are starting a family, more than a third do *not*, in fact, return. The difference between those who leave and stay away and those who engage in a spiritual quest and eventually become productive and vital leaders in faith communities is that some are guided, accompanied, and assisted through this period, while some are left on their own to sink or swim, possibly finding safe harbor along the way, but, more likely, remaining indeterminately unmoored.

A number of private colleges and a handful of public ones, buoyed and informed by the work of the HERI research team, are beginning to take seriously the task of addressing students' desire for the development of an interior life while in college. For example, Wellesley College has been at the forefront of forging dialogue spaces for students of all faiths to understand and respect one another and creating resources for other educational institutions. Duke University uses the model created by August Turak, entrepreneur and founder of the Self-Knowledge Symposium, which focuses on self-knowledge, character, community, and the desire for self-transcendence through small groups, to assist students with vocational discernment, leadership and ethical development, and rigorous spiritual seeking.⁷ Those engaged in these efforts, both professionals and students alike, report that one of the keys to the efficacy of such programs is leadership. Young adults need to be in relationship with others, with whom they can process their questions, receive ideas, test and challenge themselves, and be taken seriously. Leaders, in turn, must be honest, informed, and practicing their faith in a daily and transparent way that exhibits both the benefits and sacrifices of a life committed to faith.

While mentoring and nurture are central to the successful transition to a faith that is thoughtful and developing, these elements alone are still not enough—and certainly not enough for the church to fulfill its promise and hope for an engaged, informed, and convicted membership, lay and ordained alike. As John Westerhoff, Christian educator, writer, and theologian, puts it in his seminal text, *Will Our Children Have Faith*:

We have expected too much of nurture, for at its very best, nurture makes possible institutional incorporation. We can nurture persons into institutional religion, but not into mature Christian faith. The Christian faith by its very nature demands conversion. . . . Of course, persons need to be and can be nurtured into a community's faith and life. There is a basic need to belong to and identify with a faithful community, to own its story as our story, and to have our religious affections nourished. . . . But persons also need, if they are to grow in faith, to be aided and encouraged to judge, inquire, question and even to doubt that faith; to be given the opportunity to experiment with and reflect upon alternatives; and to learn what it means to commit their lives to causes and persons. Only after an intellectual struggle with our community's faith and with an honest consideration of alternatives can a person truly say "I believe"—and thereby achieve personal Christian identity. Only then, I contend, can a person live the radical, political, economic, social life of the Christian in the world.⁸

As Christians, our goal and hope must always be conversion. That is not to say that we would diminish or devalue the faith of our Buddhist or Jewish brothers and sisters, saying that their faith is inadequate or based on falsehood. Indeed, if we are truly converted and able to live "the radical, political, economic, social life of the Christian in the world," then we must be able to live without being threatened by other truths and other paths and be able to see the depth of others' religious devotion and action in the world as complimentary to our own. But it is to say that we seek an experience wherein persons are transformed to strive for, with every ounce of their being, the life that Christ envisioned for us. And for those for whom faith is absent or empty, we must be able to articulate why the way of Christ could be life giving and life transforming for them.

■ Critical Questions for the Church

The critical questions for the church then become:

- In what ways do we respond to, support, and guide the needs and desires of young adults to integrate spiritually, to deconstruct and reconstruct their faith or current worldview, and to engage in religious practices that are independently chosen but connected to a larger community and tradition that we believe will be ultimately life giving and transforming for them over the rest of their lives?

- How do we do this in a way that takes seriously the culture and realities of life in the twenty-first century where pluralism is de facto and many have no formal religious background?
- How do we form in them the commitments required to lead in today's world with all its complexity and temptation?

The organizing unit for Christians has not always been a local congregation, complete with a building, a professional and geographically located pastor, and a (relatively) stable membership. In the beginning of Methodism, we were a wide and varied movement, led by a tireless and deeply faithful man, John Wesley, who was “teacher, publisher, missionary, fundraiser, administrator of the connection, and chaplain for the people called Methodist.”⁹ The early Methodist societies were relatively small groups that met regularly for mutual support, prayer, Bible study, and even preaching, primarily by laypersons and less frequently by an ordained clergyperson. The members were encouraged to attend worship on Sundays at the local parish; but then, during the week, they met to seek “Christian perfection” in every aspect of their daily lives. As we look back on these societies today, and as they evolved even in Wesley’s time, what was called “society” was essentially the early church in Methodism.

Our earliest examples from Scripture of organizing units for the Christian movement include the band of twelve motley young men and their peripatetic guru, and that same guru’s pronouncements of what constituted an organizing unit: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I also.” (Matt. 18:20) Our current understanding of ecclesiology has moved quite a bit away from these models; and what we are faced with now is an institutionalized and often unwieldy behemoth that can sometimes prevent us from living as Christ as much as it can further it. I do not mean in any way to diminish the millions of lives transformed through our current models of church or the depth and breadth of good that is done through service out of our churches or the remarkable faithfulness of the persons who belong to our churches. I merely want to juxtapose our early, first-century Christian models and our early Methodist models of societies with our late twentieth-century models of church for the purposes of encouraging an openness to ecclesiological creativity and diversity.

And so, given what we know about young adults’ needs for spirituality, for freedom and space to question and grow, for educated and talented mentors, for communities in which to practice an integrated faith, for peers with whom they can journey—why is it that we would see campus ministries as marginal, the very places where these things are happening, calling them unnecessary or not critical to our collective mission? Or why would we call these places a “mission” of the church or an “extension” of the church and not simply the church itself? And yet, this is what we are doing when it comes to the church that exists in ministry on campus. In reviewing the literature on the spiritual needs of students, the role of mentoring in the college years, and the declining church involvement of young adults, it is striking how little of this research is being done by the church. While the church may

bemoan the state of things with respect to its aging populace and declining membership, investment and attention being given to the place where a large number of our young adults actually are—campuses—is glaringly absent.

Why would we sound the alarm and then fail to answer the call? *Why would we*, indeed? Part of the answer lies in our myopic understandings of what church is—that it is a building, a Sunday morning worship service, a set group of people, instead of a way, a life, a body, and a movement. The United Methodist Church’s current campaign to “Rethink Church,” targeted at 18–30 year olds, addresses this thinking and seeks to move us into more holistic, and possibly even more historically grounded, understandings and expressions of church. Yet, if one enters a zip code into the search engine on the campaign’s website to request “a United Methodist Effort Near You,” only local churches, not campus ministries, will be returned.

Another part of the answer lies in the failure of campus ministries to be little more than advanced youth groups, or pastoral care centers, or community social justice centers. Again, I do not intend to disparage the important ministry that happens through these places or to diminish in any way the persons engaged in these activities. But I do believe that these separate aspects sell short the total ministry and purpose for our church communities on campus and do not fulfill their potential in forming committed and mature Christian leaders and disciples. Moreover, campus ministries have sometimes failed to articulate their contribution and necessity to the church as a whole. But the same could be said about the larger church’s articulation of its necessity in the world; so, perhaps, campus ministry can be forgiven its lack of an audible apologetics. This does not, however, alleviate the need for the case to be made.

And yet, when the church is active and engaged through a ministry with campuses, and when a ministry to campus is broad-minded and varied, supported by the larger community of faith and led by an informed and patient clergyperson capable of both nurture and challenge, then we can know that we are answering the sound of the alarm. When the church takes seriously its call to make disciples of Christ and realizes that a vast, spiritually seeking population exists on campus and is ready to hear the life-transforming message of Jesus, then we can know we are responding to our evangelistic imperative. When the church accepts the responsibility to encourage the campus community not only to be a community modeling peace and justice but also to transform the whole world through the leaders being trained therein, then can we know that we are taking steps to make real the hope that all of our children would become generative and mature in their leadership in church and society. Our task is huge, but the continuance of the Christian movement depends on our ability to cultivate each successive generation of Christian leaders.

■ Campus Ministry in Ecclesial Context

In the aforementioned appeal from the local congregation was acknowledgement, albeit tacit, that our campus ministry is reaching young adults, and doing so in significant numbers and

life-changing ways. This has not always been the case; which is not to say the campus ministry was ineffective, but that its reach was limited. When I arrived at the campus ministry in 1999, there was a small core group of students who, while identifying as Christian, found themselves marginalized on a campus where “Christian” was perceived as equating with a set of conservative political ideologies, including opposition to rights for LGBTQ persons, membership in the Republican party, and traditional views about biblical interpretation. These identities and values did not match with their beliefs and sensibilities, and they experienced exclusion and criticism from other Christian students on campus. And, within the wider, secular culture of the Western United States, these students experienced suspicion about their Christian identity from the nonreligious population. Politically, they were marginalized for being Christian; and within the Christian community, they felt diminished and devalued due to their different understandings of the authority of Scripture, sexual ethics, and activism.

The campus ministry saw its role as healing the wounds of these students through pastoral care, providing a scriptural foundation for their more progressive theologies, and offering opportunities to serve and put their Christian faith into action. The campus minister had a notable presence on campus, often speaking to groups about how progressive Christianity understands certain aspects of academic and public life. All of these are laudable efforts; and though the student group was relatively small, the ministry’s existence and stand for an integration of education and faith was an important and appreciated part of the campus milieu. And for those who were involved, the experience was significant.

Furthermore, as an exercise in moving the church’s self-understanding from a building to a movement, the campus ministry, like most campus ministries, had much to witness to the wider body of the church. Like the early Methodist societies, the campus ministry was made up of a group of people meeting regularly and daily attempting to discern their calls through the resources of their education, the wisdom of the tradition, and the life of Christ testified to in Scripture. And as these persons discerned what their vocation might be, they were intentional about sharing their understanding of who Christ is and what a life in Christ could be for others. In order to share this good news, students and leaders alike were forced to find new phrases and new words that communicated the same possibilities but were not laden with connotations that had become rigid and distancing. As a model of how language is rethought to communicate enduring truths, campus ministries are excelling.

Still, the overriding challenge for the church’s work is for the invitation to transformed life to be issued and responded to much more broadly than was happening through our campus ministry in the past. Moreover, for the church to be renewed in each generation, it is essential for young adults to have the experience of actually being the body of Christ, an ecclesiological unit, wherein God is known and worshiped, persons are challenged and nurtured, leadership and creativity are exercised, and out of which persons can serve and transform their structures and communities, understanding all of this as an ongoing way of life and a self-orientation. It should not be merely an exercise in inter-Christian apologetics or an isolated peer group focused inwardly for a period of four or five years. Finally, for this

campus church to fulfill the totality of all we are called to incarnate, the members must be able to extend an invitation to others to follow Christ, now and in the future. To do this with authenticity and substance, students must struggle with the variety of belief and commitment in today's culture. I contend there is no better place to do this work than on our campuses, in all of their complexity and diversity, and no more potentially fruitful time than in the young adult years.

To get at creating a ground out of which students can do this work, our campus ministry has expanded to include a multi-faith residential community, a home for thirty-eight students of a variety of faith backgrounds to live intentionally with one another, growing and learning. Each resident signs a covenant agreeing to share his or her faith; seek to grow spiritually; participate in community life, including table fellowship at a weekly community meal; serve in a way that promotes peace and justice and is motivated by his or her faith; and live simply and sustainably, valuing relationships with others, God, and the earth over acquiring things.¹⁰ The community is made up of students from six different faiths and spiritualities, the largest group among them being Christians. In this pluralistic environment, students have the opportunity to hear other worldviews and faith constructions, test out their own understandings and consider, finally, what is unique and essential about a life in Christ. Much like learning a second language allows us to comprehend our native tongues more fully, there is nothing like daily engagement with faith in a pluralistic environment to lead one into an articulated and owned faith.

Pluralism is a reality for young adults in the United States today, and the presence of competing truths can initially cause students to wonder whether there is any truth at all. Without a community or guidance, students may be left wondering long after they leave campus. Our work is to help them mine the richness of other faiths and spiritualities, while helping them to go deeper into their own faith, developing a more informed, nuanced understanding. Through the Multifaith Living Community (MLC), students are led into deep and sustained engagement with a variety of faiths, which brings them to appreciation for other paths to God. As witnessed to by one student:

Looking back, a great deal of my own intimate friendships have been with Christians. It has been great for me to develop meaningful, lasting, and deep friendships with Sikhs, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. I have been able to see what I appreciate about these different faiths. My Sikh roommates have a devotion and discipline that I, as a [Christian], value and admire. From my Buddhist friends, I have learned to take joy and comfort in the present moment.

And, as students gain new perspectives on spiritual practices and disciplines in other faiths, they are led back into their own faith to discover what exists in their own tradition. For instance, in our campus ministry, our students have chosen to delve deeply into the core practices of the Christian faith. Communion, in its authority, history, and practice, has been examined and deconstructed; the eight core tenets of progressive Christianity¹¹ have been discussed and debated; the connection between social-justice movements and

Christianity has been explored; and creeds, from the Apostles' Creed to more modern statements of faith, have been engaged. This is essentially theological work, and too many of our faith communities do not push our members to struggle for themselves with who God and Christ are. If we do not know who God and Christ are, we will be unable to fully be the church, the body of Christ on earth.

Let us return to the current Rethink Church campaign, the emphasis of which is that *church* is a verb, and that being church is a daily, active, sustained way of life. While I wholeheartedly support this revision of our understanding, it seems to me that the essential step of doing the theological work of exploring who we believe God to be, through our tradition, Scripture, and practice, has been skipped. Nowhere on the Rethink Church website are we given a compelling reason why Christianity equates with disaster relief, sustainable ecology, or food pantries. And yet what we are doing in campus ministry is a daily and active life in faith *grounded and supported by an engaged and informed theology*. In a living environment, this work happens daily and naturally, as students share the ways in which their coursework causes them to rethink their faith and question one another about their respective systematic theologies. One student put it this way:

Living in the MLC has helped me to broaden my understanding of what it means to live a life of service. I have come to view service as making the choice to respond to others with love and compassion. I do not need to seek out opportunities to do this—I just need to be open to God's daily call. This has given me a more immediate understanding of my purpose in life, which is first and foremost about building relationships with others. This involves challenging personal views as well as more systemic problems, both of which can prevent us from loving each other as God loves us.

Moreover, engaging in this work in a pluralistic environment leads to an ability to articulate why, among all competing and compelling theologies, Christianity is one's chosen and owned path. For young adults, a faith that is alive is an active, reasoned, and daily faith, motivated by a tested and owned theology.

The ethereal, dynamic quality of faith demands that we not try to contain it or define it as residing in one place. When the Rethink Church campaign asks, for example, "What if church provided legal aid for immigrants? Would you come?" we still are confronted with the presupposition that there is a place to which to come, even as the campaign ambiguously attempts to define church more broadly and actively. By contrast, campus ministries, on a daily basis, face the very different understanding of place that young adults have. Young adults are connected electronically in multiple ways, and, by and large, have experienced a transiency unknown at the same levels in previous generations. Campus ministers understand the ways in which this reality can not only be dealt with but embraced, as we assist students in prioritizing values so that technology can enhance their deepest commitments and relationships rather than being a distraction. As they engage this aspect of their lives with their understandings of community, transcendence, and even sin in all of its

dimensions—from isolation to dehumanization—their theologies take on dimensions that allow them to be faithful people in their real worlds.

The challenges and complexities facing young adults are legion. Not only are they developmentally at a place where they are questioning faith, commitments, and values, they are doing so in a pluralistic, technology-laden world wherein countless sources vie for their allegiance. In order to make sense of the chaos and to grow and develop into thoughtful and mature leaders in church and society, young adults must engage in the foundational theological work that juxtaposes the nature of God with new concepts of place. The Word must be taken seriously, but fresh ways to express good news must be discovered. Christian faith and its practices must be explored, dismantled, and tested to the extent that young adults will be able to articulate what they believe and why; and then go on to make a compelling case for why others should join them. Campus ministries are uniquely situated to guide students in this theological work because of the nature of the intensive peer environment, the pluralistic context, the interface of new learning from the academy, and the space provided away from what has been familiar. The future of the church depends on our ability as a community to nurture, guide, and ultimately lead our young adults to conversion through our ministries on campus, where they can rigorously and without judgment engage all that is facing them. It is only in experiencing conversion themselves, through the love and nurture of the community and the acceptance of a new and mature understanding of who God is and can be in our very complex yet interconnected world, that our young adults can authentically invite others into the transformed lives that they themselves have been converted to lead. Then and only then will we have the quality of leaders who can exhibit and undertake, with strength, wisdom, and commitment, the life of service that Christ calls us to, transforming our communities economically, ecologically, and vocationally. When persons are nurtured, engaged, and transformed in these ways, the body of Christ will not only be sustained but also renewed—and thus will thrive.

Notes

1. Alyssa N. Bryant, Jeung Yun Choi, and Maiko Yasuno, “Understanding the Religious and Spiritual Dimensions of Students’ Lives in the First Year of College,” *Journal of College Student Development* 44: 723–45.

2. “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose—Executive Summary.” See www.spirituality.ucla.edu/spirituality/reports/FINAL_EXEC_SUMMARY.pdf.

3. Lifeway Research is affiliated with the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.

4. “Spiritual Life of College Students,” 2.

5. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981).

6. Audrey Barnick, “Why Young Adults Quit Church.” *Christian Post Reporter* (8 August 2007). Online at www.christianpost.com/article/20070808/survey-reasons-why-young-adults-quit-church/index.html#. Accessed 3 September 2009.