Churches Engaging Young People in Cultural Context

Research Findings and Implications for Youth Ministry Education

New Research from the Fuller Youth Institute

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Abstract

The Fuller Youth Institute is completing an interdenominational study of over 250 congregations with perceived effectiveness in their engagement of teenagers and emerging adults (ages 15-29), with the goal of understanding how and why exemplary churches effectively engage young people. This paper includes an overview of the study design and selected insights from quantitative and qualitative research that specifically highlights how these churches relate to their surrounding cultural context. Churches that are exemplary in ministry with young people generally take a positive posture toward engaging culture with the goal of becoming "good neighbors" to the surrounding community, broader culture, and world.

Introduction

A growing body of research points to a tragedy in American Christianity: almost half of formerly churched young people disengage from God and the church after high school.[1] In response to this reality, the Fuller Youth Institute's College Transition Project[2] led to the Sticky Faith movement and resources, all committed to the development of lifelong faith. While these resources have proven helpful, most leaders agree that the faith attrition of young people isn't merely a youth ministry problem—it is a systemic church problem. Although senior pastoral leaders (many of whom serve in aging congregations) express an almost universal desire to engage young people, they often don't know where to start or how to change their church culture to make that possible.

A thorough literature review in this area confirms that there is a significant need for research and resources that empower the entire congregation to become more effective in engaging teenagers and emerging adults.[3] Specifically, a need exists for research that incorporates all of the following factors into one study: encompassing 15-29 year olds,[4] taking a hopeful posture by focusing on congregations that are excelling in their ministry with young people, examining the relationship between the youth/young adult ministry and the entire congregation, blending social sciences with theology and contextualization, and understanding the process of change that congregations undergo in order to begin engaging young people.

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[1] The Fuller Youth Institute's estimate that 40 to 50 percent of high school graduates will fail to stick with their faith is based on a compilation of data from the following studies: Barna Update, "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," The Barna Group, September 16, 2006; George H. Gallup, Jr. "The Religiosity Cycle," The Gallup Poll, October 19, 2006. Frank Newport, "A Look at Religious Switching in America Today," The Gallup Poll, October 19, 2006; LifeWay, "LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church," LifeWay Christian Resources, http://www.lifeway.com/article/165949/; Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[2] The College Transition Project began with a pilot phase in 2004 and two subsequent longitudinal studies launched in 2006 and 2007, extending seven years total and including two additional qualitative studies. See Kara Eckmann Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

[3] In this paper, the term "emerging adults" refers to 19 to 29 year-olds. The term "emerging adult" was first coined by Jeffrey J. Arnett in 2000. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties," *American Psychologist*, May 2000.

[4] For the purpose of this study, we are defining young people as ages 15-29. For a more detailed explanation of the research method and conclusions from Stage One, please see Brad M. Griffin and Jake Mulder, "Churches Engaging Young People: Preliminary Research Findings and Implications for Youth Ministry Education" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Association of Youth Ministry Educators, Washington, DC, October 18-20, 2014). http://www.aymeducators.org/conference-papers/.

In order to conduct this study, Fuller Theological Seminary's Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) sought and received funding from four foundations to fund a three-year Churches Engaging Young People (CEYP, pronounced "keep") Project studying over 250 nominated exemplar Protestant and Roman Catholic churches from across the United States on the basis of perceived effectiveness in their engagement of young people (ages 15-29). *The overall goal of the CEYP project is to understand how and why exemplary churches are effectively engaging young people,[5] so that other churches can learn, contextually apply, and become more effective in their engagement of young people.*

Specific Goals of the Project

A literature review highlighted several studies that have explored the reasons why young people are drifting from the church. However, sufficient examination has not yet focused on uncovering productive solutions for the entire congregation. As a consequence, youth workers and church leaders generally design programs without the benefit of empirical evidence, relying instead upon anecdotal observations and common wisdom. The hope is that the CEYP study not only will begin to fill a significant gap in the academic literature, but also will bring about wide-ranging and transformative practical benefits for congregations. Research goals include:

- To identify congregational practices for effectively engaging young people.

- To understand how engaging young people may contribute to a thriving church.

- To describe next-step processes for congregations that want to enact changes toward more effective ministry with young people.

Methodology

To accomplish these goals, the study has taken place in three stages. Stage One consisted of a quantitative and qualitative online survey, completed by 373 church leaders from 259 nominated churches. Stage Two utilized qualitative one-hour structured phone interviews with 535 congregational participants from 41 exemplar churches. Stage Three involved site visits to 12 of

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[5] "Effectively engaging young people," refers to churches that are involving and retaining young people in the congregational community, as well as helping them develop a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ.

these churches, serving as illustrative case studies. These visits allowed for more in-depth analysis and a "thick description" of prior findings via observation, document analysis, and interviews. Each stage of the study has been informed and improved upon by the involvement of an Expert Advisory Council, made up of sixteen experts in the areas of youth ministry and church health.[6] Four Senior Research Advisors from Fuller Theological Seminary have also provided significant expertise throughout the project.[7]

Stage One Research

The research team solicited nominations of churches that were perceived as being particularly effective in their engagement of young people from 35 denominational leaders, scholars, and experts in church/youth ministry. From their nominations of 363 congregations, 259 chose to participate in the study between September 2013-March 2014 by having one senior pastor and/or one youth/young adult pastor complete a survey in Stage One. In total, 373 pastors participated from these 259 congregations.

Over 21 denominations were represented among the responding churches, in addition to 43 congregations indicating no denominational affiliation. The largest five specific traditions represented were Baptist (32 churches), Presbyterian (32), United Methodist (26), Evangelical Covenant (17), and Roman Catholic (15). Churches ranged in size from under 100 participants to over 10,000 participants, the largest three categories being 1,001-3,000 (28 percent), 501-1,000

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[6] The Expert Advisory Council includes Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, Professor of Youth, Culture and Family at Princeton Theological Seminary; Dr. Andrew Root, Carrie Olson Baalson Chair of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary; Dr. Terry Linhart, Chair of Department of Religion and Philosophy at Bethel College; Dr. Dave Rahn, Vice President and Chief Ministry Officer for Youth for Christ USA and faculty member at Huntington University; David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Research Group; Andy Crouch, Executive Editor of Christianity Today; Brad Lomenick, former director of Catalyst; Mark DeVries, founder of Ministry Architects; Steve Argue, Assistant Professor of Youth, Family, and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary; Dr. Pamela Ebstyne King, Associate Professor of Marital and Family Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary; Dr. Soong-Chan Rah, Milton B. Engebretson Associate Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary; Dr. Bob McCarty, Executive Director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry; Amy McEntee, Executive Director of the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association; Reggie Joiner, founder and CEO of Orange and the reThink Group; Virginia Ward, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; and Tyler Reagin, Executive Director of Catalyst.

[7] These Senior Research Advisors include Dr. Scott Cormode, Director of Innovation and Hugh De Pree Professor of Leadership Development; Dr. Chap Clark, Professor of Youth, Family, and Culture; Dr. James Furrow, Evelyn and Frank Freed Professor of Marital and Family Therapy and Chair of the Department of Marriage and Family; and Dr. Cameron Lee, Professor of Marriage and Family Studies, Department of Marriage and Family. Together, they provide expertise in the areas of congregational culture and leadership, youth culture, family relations, and instrument and general research design. In addition, the research team is grateful to the team of nearly 40 research assistants and FYI staff members who assisted with data collection and analysis.

(24 percent), and 251-500 (15 percent). They ranged geographically across all census regions of the U.S., with the heaviest representations from the Midwest (33 percent), West (31 percent), and South (25 percent). In terms of ethnic diversity (based on reporting churches), 56 percent of churches identified as "mostly White" (meaning over 80%), 31 percent were multiracial (meaning the congregation included at least 20% or more from each of two different ethnic/racial groups), 8 percent were "mostly African American," 2 percent were "mostly Asian," and 3 percent were "mostly Hispanic/Latino." As for socioeconomic diversity (based on reporting churches), 7 percent indicated they were primarily upper class congregations, 41 percent primarily upper-middle class, 41 percent primarily middle class, 8 percent primarily lower-middle, and 3 percent primarily lower-class. Regarding the type of community in which the congregation was located, (based on reporting churches) 56 percent of the churches reported being suburban, 33 percent urban, 3 percent rural, and 8 percent a mix of urban, suburban, and rural.

The Stage One surveys included questions about the church's size, attendance rates, growth patterns and presence of young people, socioeconomics, ethnic diversity, and the leader's definition of spiritual vibrancy (and evidence of vibrancy among young people). A scale was developed to rate the presence of eight specific congregational characteristics predicted to be associated with successful engagement of young people,[8] as well as a scale gauging the faith maturity of young people in the congregation. Additional open-ended questions invited leaders to describe characteristics they believe account for their church's success with engaging young people, challenges they face when it comes to ministering to young people, and ways they have seen young people contribute to the health or growth of their congregation.

Stage Two Research

Based upon the results of the analyses in Stage One, our research team identified several questions for further exploration in Stage Two. This research began in April 2014, consisting of one-hour phone interviews with 535 young people, parents, church staff, and volunteers across 41 exemplary churches selected from the 259 churches that participated in Stage One (up to 20

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[8] Based on review of the existing literature, the research team developed an initial working list of characteristics that seemed likely to be present in churches that are effectively engaging young people. These characteristics were submitted to the Senior Research Advisors and Expert Advisory Council for review, resulting in eight characteristics that provided an initial basis for the study.

interviews were conducted per church). These churches were selected according to the following criteria: a high percentage of young people attending, the pastor (or leader's) impression of high faith maturity of the congregation's young people, a high percentage of the congregation participating in eight identified congregational characteristics, and the expert opinion of the research team (based on review of individual survey narratives). The research team was also intentional to select churches representing a diversity of denominations, sizes, races/ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic locations.

Invitations to 58 Stage One churches yielded 41 exemplary churches that agreed to participate in Stage Two of the research. FYI's research team conducted the approximately 60-minute structured phone interviews with up to 20 participants from each congregation including young people ages 18-29, parents of teenagers and emerging adults, church staff, and youth/young adult ministry volunteers.

Over 14 denominations were represented in Stage Two, in addition to 7 congregations claiming no denominational affiliation. The largest five specific traditions represented were Baptist (7 churches), United Methodist (4), Roman Catholic (4), Nazarene (3), and Evangelical Covenant (3). Churches ranged in size of participants, including 100 or fewer participants (2 percent of churches), 101-250 (20 percent), 251-500 (17 percent), 501-1000 (24 percent), 1001-3000 (20 percent), over 3001 (17 percent). In terms of census regions of the US, they were distributed among the Midwest (29 percent), West (29 percent), South (27 percent), and Northeast (15 percent). In terms of ethnic diversity (based reporting churches), 48 percent of churches identified as "mostly White," 34 percent were multiracial (meaning the congregation included at least 20 percent or more from each of two different ethnic/racial groups), 8 percent were "mostly African American," 5 percent were "mostly Asian," and 5 percent were "mostly Hispanic/Latino." Regarding socioeconomic status (based on reporting churches), 37 percent reported primarily upper-middle class, 49 percent primarily middle class, and 14 percent primarily lower middle.

The Stage Two interviews were conducted individually, and included several questions regarding demographic information of the participant, areas of involvement in the church, a description of the church, participant's perspective on why the church is effective with young people, how

young people contribute to the church, Likert scale ratings and open ended questions based on the church characteristics identified in the literature review, Likert scale ratings and open ended questions about the participant's beliefs and faith practices, and an opportunity to share any other information the participant deemed important. One interview template was created for use with young people, while a slightly different version was used with parents, volunteers, and church staff. The interview protocols were designed by FYI's research team, undergoing several rounds of review by the project's advisors as well as pilot testing.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded through a process of thematic analysis. The Stage Two interviews concluded in November 2014, yielding nearly 10,000 pages of interview transcripts. Graduate students from Fuller Seminary coded the transcripts with supervision and regular review by FYI's research team and the CEYP Project's Senior Research Advisors. Teams of two coders were assigned to each interview question and began by independently reading transcripts to generate a list of themes.[9] Then they met to create a set of open codes and code definitions. FYI's research team reviewed the selected codes and suggested appropriate modifications. Each coding team then created a final set of codes, which were again reviewed. Using NVivo qualitative coding software, teams proceeded to code an initial 25 transcripts before submitting their work to be tested for inter-rater reliability. If a Kappa of .6 or higher was not achieved, teams continued to code an additional 10 transcripts at a time until sufficient inter-rater reliability was achieved. Once this took place, coding teams divided the remaining transcripts and coded independently. In addition to the coding of the qualitative responses, the quantitative data from the Likert scales was analyzed using SPSS. Near the end of Stage Two research, an independent audit of the coding process was performed.

Stage Three Research

In Stage Three, the research team applied an initial filter to narrow the pool of Stage Two churches from 41 to 29, and then selected 12 churches that might serve as a wide variety of

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[9] The coding method was informed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2006), 77-101, as well as Clara E. Hill et. al., "Consensual Qualitative Research: An Update," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* v.52, n.2, (2005), 196-205.

illustrative case studies (representing diversity of denomination, church size, geographic location, and ethnicity).[10]

Over 8 denominations were represented in Stage Three research, in addition to 2 churches indicating no denominational affiliation. The traditions of these 12 churches included 3 Baptist churches, as well as 1 church each that identified as Assemblies of God, Evangelical Covenant, Christian Reformed, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and United Methodist. Churches ranged in size of participants, including 100 or fewer participants (1 church), 101-250 (2 churches), 251-500 (1 church), 501-1000 (4 churches), 1001-3000 (3 churches), and over 3001 (1 church). In terms of census regions of the US, they were distributed among the Midwest (3 churches), West (2 churches), South (4 churches) and Northeast (3 churches). Ethnic diversity included 4 churches that identified as "mostly White," 4 multiracial churches, 2 "mostly African American" churches, 1 "mostly Asian" church, and 1 "mostly Hispanic/Latino" church. Regarding socioeconomic status, 5 churches identified as primarily upper-middle class, 5 churches primarily middle class, and 2 churches primarily lower middle class.

Trained teams of two or three researchers conducted a site visit to each of the 12 churches. While each visit was customized to the congregation's unique context, a typical site visit took place over one weekend and included document review, in-person interviews and focus groups and observation, and subsequent interview transcript and document analysis. This ethnographically-oriented research from Stage Three was put alongside the quantitative and qualitative analysis from Stages One and Two. FYI's research team was also in regular dialogue with the advisors from the project regarding emerging interpretations of the findings.

Findings

The data from all three stages of research are still being explored through various forms of analysis by the research team. For the purpose of this paper and the AYME conference presentation, a few initial findings will be shared related to how exemplary churches from this

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[10] The initial filter first eliminated churches from Stage Two that had a lower interview participation rate, and then a second set of criteria was used to rank the remaining churches based upon the percentage of those ages 15-29 attending the church, as well as the interview participants' ratings of how those in the church possessed a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ.

study interact with their surrounding culture.[11] In this case, the term "culture" includes values and ideas, ethnic and gender identity, pop culture (such as media, art, fashion, technology, and music), politics, and heated cultural issues (such as gay marriage and immigration).[12]

1. What young people need vs. what most churches provide

Many congregations in this study seem to recognize a gap between what they offer and what young people maneuvering through our complex culture need. The pastoral survey from Stage One asked, "What are the biggest challenges your church faces in its ministry to young people?" Based on coding of the open-ended responses, 36 percent of respondents named challenges navigating culture. The most frequently named cultural obstacles included the difficulty of keeping their church relevant and the pressure on young people to conform to popular cultural norms. Further, in the Stage Two interviews of congregants, participants were asked to rate on a Likert scale (ranging from one to five with five being the highest) how true several statements were of their church. The second lowest average rating across all interview participants (3.71 out of 5) was "my church teaches people how to interact with cultural and societal issues." While the team interacted with multiple churches that excel in their cultural engagement, most congregations reported significant confusion and obstacles in this area.

2. Effective churches take a positive posture toward culture

When pastoral leaders in Stage One of the study were surveyed and asked, "What do you believe accounts for your church's success at engaging young people?" nearly one in three pointed to its inclusive and open attitude toward other people and the overall culture. In addition, when teenagers, emerging adults, parents, and church volunteers in Stage Two interviews were asked to name why their church is effective with young people, almost the same percentage named this positive posture. As one pastor from Alabama described in a Stage Two interview, "We definitely try to stay connected to culture. Philosophically, we don't fear it or treat culture like the enemy."

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[11] The way in which churches relate to culture is just one of several major themes that have emerged from the project. The research team hopes to present on additional themes at a future AYME gathering.
[12] The research team has been helped by author and FYI research advisor Andy Crouch's definition of culture as "what we make of the world." See Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 23.

One 20-something from a church in New York City shared in a Stage Two interview, "So the girl that I am dating was raised Muslim and she was agnostic for the most part. The first time I took her to my church, obviously I was a little nervous because I did not want her to think that it was crazy or anything like that. But it was actually a really incredible experience. The whole tone at our church is more about understanding than about doctrine, while also not pushing the doctrine aside … she actually started crying in the service because she was so touched."

While the churches in the study maintained consistent and firm theological convictions, they tended to lead with a spirit of grace and generosity when it came to differing opinions. In Stage Two interviews, when participants were asked, "How would you describe your church to a Christian friend?" respondents were eight times more likely to mention the diversity of beliefs in their church than the similarities. At a Stage Three church, young people were quick to mention that they feel comfortable bringing their friends because they know the teaching will proclaim biblical truth without judging people who are not yet ready to embrace that truth. "Our youth pastor is big on saying, 'Come as you are.' That makes it easy to promise our friends they won't be judged for not being Christians yet," one high school junior shared. No matter where these churches fall on the theological spectrum, they place emphasis on *essential beliefs* that could be shared, rather than exaggerating various differences. In this way, it seems that those whose beliefs do not match the church's at least feel welcome to participate in theological and Scriptural discussions.

3. Effective churches often act to make their world better

When Stage Two interview participants were asked, "What is it about your church that makes it effective with young people?" nearly 60 percent named service practices, missional practices, or generally being outward-oriented. Further, when leaders in Stage One were surveyed and asked, "What is a practice in your congregation that indicates commitment from or growth in young people?," nearly 70 percent named young people serving in some way. Sometimes these churches pursue service and justice through mission trips far from home. Other times, churches aim to make things better right in their own backyards. Further, in the Stage Two interviews when congregants were asked to rate on a Likert scale (ranging from one to five with five being the highest) how true several statements were of their church, the statement "my church

emphasizes social justice or serving others in need" was rated near the top of the list as a 4.48 out of 5.

At a Stage Three visit to a Methodist church, the research team interviewed a group of ten high school students who shared about the ways their church excels at doing good in their city. Afterward a sophomore named Abby[13] approached us and asked if she could share more details. "I just want to make sure you don't miss how *big of a deal* this is in our church," she began. Abby shared about growing up in a poorer part of town. Due to complicated family circumstances, she was adopted as an older child. Tragically, she was kicked out of this adoptive home a couple of years later. "I had started going to this church, though, because they volunteered in our school district," Abby said, holding back tears. "One of the families here took me in and adopted me. You *have* to understand how loving this church is. What we shared with you aren't just empty words. This church has changed my life."

4. Effective churches generally embrace ethnic diversity

For a variety of societal reasons, issues surrounding ethnic diversity are growing in awareness among teenagers and emerging adults more than other generations. In Stage Two interviews, when asked, "Imagine you were describing your church to a Christian friend. In a few sentences, how would you describe the church?," one out of five young people ages 24-29 mentioned ethnic diversity. However, only one in ten church leaders or older adults within these same churches chose to highlight diversity. Through surveys, interviews, and site visits, it became clear that in many communities, and certainly in media culture, racial and ethnic diversity are part of the air young people breathe. Yet most denominations and churches in the US represent an overwhelmingly monocultural tribe.[14]

During a visit to an intentionally multiethnic congregation in Stage Three, the researchers probed deeper into the church's focus on ethnic diversity. Conversations centered around two topics: *the gospel* and *racial reconciliation*. The second was never mentioned without the first. "Racial reconciliation is *not* the goal. The goal is the gospel. The gospel is to love the people in your neighborhood, at work, and at the gym. Those are the people we're asked to engage with as we

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[13] Abby's name has been changed to protect her identity.
[14] See "The most and least racially diverse U.S. religious groups," Pew Research Center, accessed September 9, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/.

live out the gospel. We hear, 'What does your dinner table look like? Who are you inviting into your home?' Life change comes when your table has people who are different from you. Reconciliation is part of the gospel," shared one twenty-seven year-old.

Another high school student from the same church added, "In my public school, everyone's integrated. But when it comes to churches, there's so much segregation in town. Our church is more like the school. When I bring a friend, they're like, 'Oh wow, this is different than *my* church.'"

Discussion and Implications for Youth Ministry Education

While the research team continues to explore the implications of these and other findings from the project, the authors suggest a few preliminary implications as well as ongoing questions for reflection.

1. Recover a theology that enables Christians to neighbor well

During interviews and site visits, researchers asked young people, "What shapes your church's approach to culture?" These young people frequently referred to the example set by Jesus, in particular his focus on being a good neighbor. In Matthew 22, when an expert in the law asks Jesus to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus replies by citing Deuteronomy 6:5: "[To] love the Lord Your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Moving beyond this familiar Jewish command, Jesus then adds a second "greatest" command that references Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself." For Jesus, love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable.

The obvious question that follows is, *then who is my neighbor?* Thankfully, Jesus addresses this question in the well-known parable of *the Good Samaritan.* In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus tells the story of a Jewish man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho who is violently attacked, robbed, and left to die. Two religious authorities, a priest and a Levite, see the man, but pass by. Then a Samaritan traveler, despite being an enemy of the Jews, stops to help. He bandages the stranger's wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays for his expenses. Unlike the religious-but-aloof neighbors, the Samaritan enacted true neighboring. This kind of selfless mercy is what and who Jesus had in mind when he defined "neighbor."

The churches studied reflect this same mercy toward the people outside of their walls—whether those neighbors are friends, strangers, or even enemies. They demonstrate compassion and forgiveness, even when it is within their power to turn away or inflict harm. Effective churches practice this mercy in a myriad of forms—in their service and social justice efforts, in their political engagement, in discussions about race and ethnic identity, and in response to pop culture. By doing so, these churches seem to *earn a hearing with young people* in a culture that highly values diversity and tolerance.

Question: What are the theological challenges or roadblocks for churches that aim to engage culture in positive and life-giving ways? What other theological resources might be helpful in this effort?

2. Train pastors and youth ministry leaders to listen to their neighbors

The research team discovered that effective churches are skilled at listening to their neighbors. They listen in a variety of ways, including consulting US Census data, one-on-one conversations with those in their surrounding neighborhood, intentionally watching movies or listening to music that can help them learn about the wider culture, conducting in-depth surveys of their congregation, and much more. One associate pastor shared at a Stage Three site visit:

> We conducted a church wide survey and were shocked when we realized how many single people are part of our community. Most of our preaching and programming was targeted to married couples with kids. As a result, we hired a singles ministry pastor, and it's now one of our largest ministries. Our pastor also adapted the way he preaches, now including single people in his examples. We also realized we needed to talk more about sex and dating, which we did. For that series, we had four times the number of people show up as we usually do. It was a lesson for us that too few churches are talking about topics like these.

Question: Especially when it comes to theological education, how can we train pastors and youth ministry leaders to listen to their neighbors (in addition to listening to other sources of wisdom including God, Scripture, tradition, experience, and research)?

3. Prepare undergraduate and graduate students to serve in diverse contexts

As mentioned above, it is important to prepare future church leaders to serve in increasingly diverse contexts. This point is captured well by Soong-Chan Rah, professor at North Park University and FYI research advisor, who writes:

> The American church needs to face the inevitable and prepare for the next stage of her history—we are looking at a nonwhite majority, multiethnic American Christianity in the immediate future. Unfortunately, despite these drastic demographic changes, American evangelicalism remains enamored with an ecclesiology and a value system that reflect a dated and increasingly irrelevant cultural captivity and are disconnected from both a global and a local reality.[15]

This preparation to serve in diverse contexts seems to be easier said than done. When exploring the relationships between effectiveness of churches with higher and lower levels of diversity, the findings were complex. Across various analyses from the Stage One and Stage Two data, diverse churches (those with 80 percent or less from the same ethnic group, meaning at least 20 percent come from one or more additional ethnicities) fare better than non-diverse churches in ratings of church health as well as the faith maturity of young people.[16] As churches achieve greater than 80 percent diversity (moving closer to only 70 percent or 60 percent of the congregation representing the same race), they begin to report incrementally lower levels of health and faith maturity.

One interpretation of these results is that when a congregation is less than 20 percent diverse, something important is lost—at least when it comes to engaging young people. But as a church increases diversity and gets closer to half (or less) of congregation members representing any one primary racial/ethnic group, the work of church life and ministry gets harder. When discussing these findings with advisors with diverse ethnic backgrounds, they resonated with the challenge

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[15] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 12.
[16] Specifically, statistically significant correlations were found between diversity at this level (versus non-diverse churches) and: emphasizing social justice and serving others in need, teaching people how to interact with cultural and societal issues, helping people understand that faith is about more than behaviors or following rules, having engaging worship services, faith influencing friendships, and having young people who take time to read and study the Bible.

that as diversity increases, so does complexity. These same advisors suggested the best place to start preparing future church leaders to be more effective in diverse contexts is likely helping them develop friendships and professional relationships now with those of different ethnic groups.

Question: How can our educational institutions best help students develop these friendships and professional relationships with those of different ethnic groups? What are the unique obstacles and opportunities for educational institutions that are primarily monocultural in student body and/or leadership?

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