Abstract

The Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) is conducting an interdenominational study of congregations with perceived effectiveness in their engagement of young people (ages 15-29), with the goal of understanding how and why exemplary churches are effectively engaging young people so that other churches can learn, contextually apply, and become more effective in their engagement of young people.

Stage one of a three-stage project included online surveys of 373 youth/young adult pastors and senior pastors from 259 nominated exemplar congregations. This paper includes the study design overview and initial insights from qualitative thematic analysis of pastoral surveys, including pastoral perceptions of young people’s spiritual vibrancy and faith commitment. The project is led by Kara Powell, Ph.D., Principal Investigator.

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Introduction

A growing body of research points to a tragedy in the Church across the United States: 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 Project² led to the Sticky Faith movement and resources, all committed to the development of lifelong faith. While these resources have proven to be 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 are serving 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 reveals that there is a significant need for research and resources that will empower the entire congregation to become more effective in engaging young people.³ Specifically, a need exists for research that incorporates all of the following factors into one study: encompassing 15-29 year olds,⁴

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: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-term Faith in Teenagers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).
³ We are grateful for the groundwork of the Exemplary Youth Ministry (EYM) study, which provided a rigorous methodology and valuable conclusions that have informed the research method and assumptions of the Churches Engaging Young People Project. See Wes Black, Roland Martinson, and John Roberto, The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry (St. Paul: EYM Publishing, 2010). The CEYP project expands EYM in the following ways: extending to ministry with young people up to age 29; placing special emphasis on the process of congregational change; exploring how young people contribute to church thriving; and including a broad denominational and non-denominational network.
⁴ For the purpose of this study, we are defining young people as ages 15-29. We believe this represents the age group most identified as being absent from the church, and it builds on the theoretical work of emerging adulthood pioneered by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
taking a hopeful posture by focusing on congregations that are excelling, 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.

In order to conduct this study, Fuller Theological Seminary’s Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) sought and received funding from the Lilly Endowment, Tyndale House Foundation, and other sources to fund a three-year Churches Engaging Young People (CEYP, pronounced “Keep”) Project studying over 200 nominated exemplar Protestant and Roman Catholic churches from across the United States that have perceived effectiveness in their engagement of young people (ages 15-29). The Churches Engaging Young People (CEYP) Project builds upon the findings from the Fuller Youth Institute’s College Transition Project, as well as an extensive review of the existing literature. The goal of the CEYP project is to understand how and why exemplary churches are effectively engaging young people, so that other churches can learn, contextually apply, and become more effective in their engagement of young people.5

Theoretical Basis

Parents, youth workers, and churches devote a great deal of time and energy to creating and maintaining vibrant ministries in local congregations that will engage and pass on faith to the next generation. Yet as stated above, almost half of formerly churched young people disengage from God and the church after high school. Even those who will return to the faith later in life face some of the most formative and turbulent years of their lives outside of a community of faith. This results in significant loss for both the young people and the community of faith.

5 When we say “effectively engaging young people,” we are referring 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. This is a working definition that we anticipate will be refined during the course of this research.
Sociologists of religion Christian Smith and Robert Wuthnow have served as two leading voices on the changing religious landscape in America, including the religious lives of young people. Reporting on the *National Study of Youth and Religion* (NSYR), a groundbreaking study of 13-21 year olds, Smith and the research team note, “The passage of American youth moving from the teenage years toward full adulthood today is often confusing, troubled, and sometimes dangerous. Many who make this passage find themselves disoriented, wounded, and sometimes damaged along the way.” The NSYR researchers explain that the major problems young people face include confused moral reasoning, disengagement from civic and political life, materialistic life goals, regrettable sexual experiences, and routine intoxication.

Kenda Creasy Dean’s evaluation of the NYSR data includes an apt reminder that adults are culpable for the realities we see among the faith of young people: “American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith – but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. And one more thing: we’re responsible.” In other words, the faith crisis at hand is not primarily about teenagers, it is about the entire church. The “do-good, feel-good” version of Christian faith abundantly present in the U.S. church leads to a predicament, namely, “American young people are unwittingly being formed into an imposter faith that poses as Christianity, but that in fact lacks the holy desires and the missional clarity necessary for Christian discipleship.”

Echoing these observations, research by FYI has shown that the faith of church-going teenagers is on the whole not as robust as we might hope by the end of high school, even for those who remain involved in youth ministry. In fact, young people tend to hold an understanding of the gospel that is primarily based on behaviors rather than the grace of God offered through Jesus Christ. This is something akin to the “gospel of sin management” as it has been described by religious philosopher Dallas Willard.

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However, connection to the larger congregation through participation in intergenerational relationships and worship signifies a predictive factor for faith that is sustained across the transition out of youth ministry. Unfortunately, many young people lack this connection.

Robert Wuthnow observes that society has always felt it important to provide support and socialization for those who are not yet adults. However, he writes, “The amazing thing about this pattern of support and socialization is that it comes to a halt about the time a young person reaches the age of twenty-one or twenty-two...[This] means that younger adults are having to invent their own ways of making decisions and seeking support for those decisions.” He notes that this includes major decisions such as where to live, whether to have and how to raise children, and what sort of career to pursue.

Both Smith and Wuthnow point to the potential of religious congregations to provide the support that young people need in this time of transition. Wuthnow believes that congregations could provide this support, but it is often unrealized. He writes, “It will continue to go unrealized as long as congregations invest in youth programs for high school students and assume this is enough. It will also go unrealized if congregational leaders focus on their graying memberships and do not look more creatively to the future.”

In the conclusion of his work on the “dark side” of emerging adulthood, Smith and team reflect on the potential for churches to better support young people:

Many religious congregations in fact devote significant resources to children and teenagers, yet unfortunately seem to passively accept that their ties to youth will be lost after the high school years. But this need not happen...[W]e suspect that many religious communities could do a much better job at connecting with emerging adults and supporting them than

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10 Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*.
12 Wuthnow, 13.
many currently seem to be doing. And this would presumably be good both for the religious communities and the emerging adults involved.\textsuperscript{13}

Wuthnow seems to agree with this assessment, and takes the importance of engaging young people a step further. He believes we must keep engaging them not only to prevent young people from making significant mistakes, but also because this engagement impacts the future of religion in America. He warns, “Unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt.”\textsuperscript{14} While Wuthnow does not believe “the sky is falling,” he does urge religious leaders to “roll up their sleeves and pay considerably more attention to young adults than they have been.”\textsuperscript{15}

Young people have significant contributions to make to local congregations. Theological educator and sociologist Carol Lytch, after a study of mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Roman Catholic congregations, adds, “The process of faith transmission goes two ways: congregations transmit faith to teens and teens transmit back a revised faith that prompts renegotiation about the faith tradition itself. In this renegotiation, the tradition is vitalized.”\textsuperscript{16}

Given the importance of this topic, what can churches do in order to more effectively engage young people? Several studies have explored the reasons why young people are drifting from the church. However, sufficient studies have 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 existing scholarly literature is inadequate to guide congregations seeking to engage young people. For this reason, 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:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Smith et al, 241-242.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Wuthnow, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Wuthnow, 230.
\end{itemize}
A. To identify congregational practices for effectively engaging young people.

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

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

Method

The study is taking place in three stages. Stage One consisted of a quantitative and qualitative survey of pastors from nominated exemplar churches. This paper focuses on Stage One method and initial findings.

Stage Two is currently in progress and builds on Stage One, utilizing up to 800 qualitative one-hour structured phone interviews to explore further the characteristics and practices of 40 exemplar churches based on responses in Stage One. Stage Three will consist of site visits to 10 of these churches for more in-depth analysis via observation and interviews. Each stage of the study is 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. Four Senior Research Advisors from Fuller Theological Seminary are also providing significant expertise throughout the project.

17 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, Pastor and Theologian-in-Residence at Mars Hill Bible Church; Dr. Pamela Ebstyn 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, InterVarsity Black Campus Ministries; and Tyler Reagin, Executive Director of Catalyst.

18 These Senior Research Advisors include Dr. Scott Cormode, Dr. Chap Clark, Dr. James Furrow, and Dr. Cameron Lee. Together, they provide expertise in the areas of congregational culture and leadership, youth culture, family relations, and instrument and general research design. In addition, we are grateful to the interview, transcription, and analysis team of 29 research assistants and FYI staff members who assisted with Stage One and are currently completing Stage Two of data collection.
Stage One Participants

The research team solicited nominations of 363 churches that were perceived as being particularly effective in their engagement of young people. The nominators consisted of 35 denominational leaders, scholars, and experts in church/youth ministry. Nominators were invited from the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, as well as each of the following Protestant denominations: Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian Church USA, Evangelical Covenant, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, United Methodist, Church of the Nazarene, American Baptist USA, African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Episcopal/Anglican, Christian Reformed Church, and Christian Missionary Alliance. Other non-denominational nominators included leaders from: Fuller Seminary, Princeton Seminary, Gordon College, Trinity Evangelical Deerfield School, Luther Seminary, the Willow Creek Association, and Catalyst. Attention was given to nominators’ knowledge of churches that represent desired diverse populations (including diversity among congregational size, geographic locations, socioeconomic status, and congregational members’ ethnicities). The research team also nominated several churches from among FYI’s Sticky Faith Cohorts.

Nominators submitted the names of up to fifteen churches via an online questionnaire. Requirements included that churches be located within the United States, and the pastors be able to complete a survey and potential subsequent surveys or interviews in English. The nominations were based upon the following criteria:

A. Churches that are effectively engaging a growing number of young people (ages 15-29); or are effectively engaging a large number of young people in relation to the size of the congregation. (Up to ten churches per nominator.)

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19 The following description was given to nominators: When we say “effectively engaging young people,” we are referring to churches that are attracting and retaining young people in the congregational community, as well as helping them develop a vibrant faith in Jesus.
B. Churches that seem to have something exciting going on with young people, but their numbers aren’t large or growing. (Up to five churches per nominator.)

Nominators provided basic demographic information about each congregation, as well as a brief explanation of why the congregation was being nominated.

From the nominations of 363 exemplary congregations, 259 participated in the study. One pastor and one youth/young adult pastor from each church were invited to complete online surveys, and in total 373 pastors participated by completing surveys. Over 21 denominations were represented, in addition to 43 congregations claiming nondenominational affiliation. The largest five specific traditions represented were Baptist (32), Presbyterian (32), United Methodist (26), Evangelical Covenant (17), and Roman Catholic (15). Churches ranged in size from under 100 members to over 10,000 members, the largest three categories being 1,001-3,000 (28 percent), 501-1,000 (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, 40 percent of churches were designated “mostly White,” 11 percent were “diverse” (meaning the congregation included at least 30% or more from each of two different ethnic/racial groups), 5 percent “mostly African American,” 1 percent “mostly Asian,” and 2 percent “mostly Hispanic/Latino.” Notably, the diverse churches largely represented Hispanic/Latino members as one of the highly-represented ethnicities. Forty-one percent of churches did not report on this item. As for socioeconomic diversity, 4 percent represented primarily upper class congregations, 25 percent primarily upper-middle class, 25 percent primarily middle class, 5 percent primarily lower-middle, and 2 percent primarily lower-class, with 39 percent of churches not reporting in this area.

Stage One Measures

In stage one of the research (September 2013-March 2014), the research team conducted a combined quantitative and qualitative survey based on online questionnaires completed by one pastor and one youth/young adult pastor in each nominated congregation.
Questions were asked about the church’s size, attendance, 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, 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, what 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. The subjects of the questions were the congregation, not the pastors themselves. Slightly different versions of the survey were administered to senior pastors and youth/young adult pastors, in particular the exclusion of the faith maturity measure from the senior pastor survey, assuming the pastor may have less awareness of young people’s spiritual maturity.

Findings

While the Stage One data are still being explored and coded through various forms of analysis by our research team (including quantitative analysis and thematic coding of qualitative data), for the purposes of this paper and the AYME conference presentation we would like to discuss a few initial findings related to the open-ended responses of 373 noteworthy pastoral leaders to questions about spiritual vibrancy and commitment among young people.

1. Leaders’ descriptions of vibrant faith, commitment, and growth in young people.

The pastoral survey asked, “What is one practice (beyond church attendance) in your congregation that best signals commitment or growth in 15-29 year olds?” The responses of pastoral leaders heavily favor participation in programs initiated or organized by the church (65.7% of responses) versus more “lifestyle” practices that are initiated or organized by the individual (12.7% of responses). Activities that took place inside of the
church were also heavily favored over activities outside of the church. Responses related to participation factors varied, including: “Participation in high school, young adult and adult ministry initiatives,” “Attendance at our midweek discipleship gathering,” or “Participation in our spiritual formation workshops.”

The survey also asked, “Think of a young person (15-29 years old) in your congregation who has a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ. Please describe 3-5 characteristics of what this young person's faith looks like.” Again, the responses heavily favor what the person does and what happens externally (65.4%) versus whom the person is and what happens internally (32.6%). Nearly half (45%) described vibrant faith as participating in church-related activities (e.g. worship service, small group). For example, “Active participant in worship.” Taken together, the practices signaling growth and descriptions of vibrancy lend themselves toward an emphasis on “doing” versus “being,” something that raises questions for our research team about the significance of participation from the perspective of pastoral leaders.

When performing axial coding on the reported characteristics of vibrant faith, we found a fairly even balance between attributes or actions directed toward God (20.3% of responses, including worship or reading and studying the Bible), others (42.4%, including service and evangelism), and the individual (35.3%, including comments on their attitude or character and making godly decisions).

In a fascinating twist, the top single response category (reported by 64% of respondents) for the description of vibrant faith was related to personal descriptive traits, such as “helpful,” “kind,” and “outgoing.” For example, one pastor described vibrant faith as “consistent, willing, loyal.” Another said, “risk takers, visionary, missional minded, social justice.” This leads us to wonder whether pastoral leaders intuitively link extraversion and social skill with spiritual vibrancy. If so, what happens to the introvert, the quiet contemplative, or the socially awkward young person in our congregations?

2. Leaders’ perceptions of the contributions of young people to church health and growth.
The survey asked leaders, “Please list three ways you have seen young people (15-29 years old) contribute to the health or growth of your church.” The vast majority (63%) of the responses focused on young people’s action-oriented contributions (volunteering, assuming leadership). For example, one leader shared, “Teens with leadership potential are groomed and given lots of responsibilities. We often elevate young 20-somethings to internships or key volunteer roles. A few years ago we invited two 20-somethings on to our highest leadership team (they are now in their lower 30's).”

In contrast, 13% of responses focused on intellectual contributions (engaging relevant issues, asking difficult questions), and 10% on contributions related to heart or energy (bringing vibrancy, passion, or specific faith practices). For example, “Our proximity to the University compels us to ask important questions. Kids ask important questions and keep us on our toes” was coded as an intellectual or “head” response, while “They contribute a contemporary feel (‘coolness’) and vibrancy to worship and events” was more typical of a “heart/energy” response.

Young people’s service either inside or outside the church (including mission trips) was a dominant theme on its own across the survey. A full 85% of respondents mention serving in some way in response to this question. Forty-six percent also describe “taking on leadership” in some way. This representative quote includes both of these themes: “[Young people] are part of our body, as active and important as any other group. They serve, worship, exist in community, and have great influence in our community. We are witnessing a great work of Jesus in and through these ages in these moments.”

Finally, pastoral leaders described young people contributing to the congregation as innovators and energizers. Twenty percent of the responses mentioned young people’s tendencies toward innovation and initiating new things, and 17.2% mentioned the special energy or vibrancy that young people bring to the congregation. For example, they “challenge us to rethink habits, to reconnect action to faith.”

3. Leaders’ perceptions of factors leading to congregational effectiveness.
Why do pastoral leaders think their churches are effective? When asked, “What do you believe are three characteristics about your church that account for your success at engaging young people?” leaders’ responses clustered in three meta-categories: culture, practices, and leadership.

We were struck in the axial coding process by how strong of an emphasis is placed on the culture of the church (60.3% of responses focused on the church’s attitudes or attributes), while 20.8% focused on the church’s practices, and 17.7% focused on the church’s leadership (although almost half [48%] of all respondents mentioned church leadership as one of the factors). When leaders talked about culture, they made statements like, “We welcome questions and searching as we offer traditional, grounded worship, theology and spirituality.” In regard to practices, one leader shared, “We are a church/school/childcare and community center, so much of what we offer is geared toward families as a one-stop place for parents with children.” And a sample response focused on church leadership noted, “We have a group of elders that lead our church that are committed to seeing this younger generation engage in Kingdom centric living.”

Finally, the top single response category for this item was “making young people and their interests a priority in the church.” Forty-eight percent of responses clustered within this theme. The emphasis on placing priority on young people was so dominant across responses that we added it as one of our predicted core characteristics of a high-engaging church, and we are currently exploring it further in Stage Two interviews.

Discussion and Implications for Youth Ministry Education

While our research team continues to explore a host of relationships within the data, we are particularly interested in input from our colleagues on a few questions related to perceived vibrancy and faith commitment as they connect with youth ministry education.

First, are too many churches and church leaders relying on participation—and in particular programmatic participation—to measure commitment and growth? Or on the other hand, does participation serve as an important indicator of an actual commitment or
actual growth? How should we interpret the emphasis in the data on what young people do as indicative of their faith commitment and vibrancy? As we teach and train youth workers, how might a theology of spiritual formation as well as a deeper ecclesiology reshape pastoral expectations of young people?

Second, if vibrant faith is largely defined in terms of personality characteristics, what metanarratives exist under these kinds of definitions? What messages do the young people in our midst hear implicitly or explicitly about the value of extraversion and social adeptness in the Kingdom of God? How can we educate those in ministry training—who in a majority of cases possess such highly-prized characteristics—to value and create space for the introvert, the quiet contemplative, and the socially awkward young person in their midst?

Third, we heard little mention of Jesus in leaders’ descriptions of vibrancy, commitment, or what makes their church effective at engaging young people. What do we make of this in light of the way we train our students to serve the faith community? How might we elevate the importance of Jesus in our conversations about ministry in ways that contribute to the language emerging leaders use in their congregations? What would it look like for pastoral leaders to bear witness to the presence and work of Christ in the midst of a community above the virtues of leadership, service, or effective programming?

**Next Steps**

The project is currently in Stage Two, in which we are further exploring these themes in forty congregations who participated in Stage One. Churches that were identified as being particularly exemplary among the rest were invited to participate in this phase, based on their survey responses. Selection criteria included: a high percentage of young people attending, the pastoral leader’s impression of high faith maturity of the young people, a high percentage of the congregation participating in specific congregational characteristics, and/or 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, socio-economic statuses, and geographic locations. The research team is employing a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) methodology to study up to 800 church leaders, congregation members, volunteers, parents, and young people (age 18 and older) in each of the 40 exemplar congregations, utilizing one-hour structured phone interviews with up to 20 participants from each congregation. We will seek to discover the strengths, gifts, and practices embodied in these churches.

In the final Stage Three of the project, we plan to conduct site visits to approximately ten churches for more in-depth analysis via observations and interviews. We will pay special attention to the change process, including stories of change. At the conclusion of the study, we hope to share broadly a tested theory and practices from among innovative congregations who are faithfully serving young people.
References


