

We Are Thirsty

Notes from the Front Lines of Young Adult Ministry



by Terence E. Hagans II

In Amos 8:11-13, the prophet proclaims, “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will send a famine throughout the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord... In that day the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst.” Young adults are thirsty. It doesn’t take much to see why. One look around your sanctuary on a Sunday morning is all it takes to realize that the young men and women so desperately in need of God’s life-giving words are nowhere to be found.

As a 26-year-old pastor, my heart burns to see the unchurched, de-churched, and out-of-church young adults of my generation become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and to the glory of God. I hope these “in the trenches” reflections from the front lines of our church’s efforts to quench the spiritual thirst of the young adults in our community will give you some inspiration and encouragement as you seek to do the same.

First Steps

When I was appointed to serve as the Pastor of Young Adults at The Woodlands United Methodist Church in June 2008, my first efforts were directed toward “loss prevention.” I quickly built relationships with the youth ministry staff and students so that they would know the church is still deeply interested in them even after they graduate from high school. Our church’s first ever Summer College Ministry—which included a weekly gathering, weekend activities, and small groups—quickly grew to an average attendance of over forty students, with almost one-hundred different students joining our community at some point during the summer.

Although most of my summer was devoted to these college

students, most of whom returned to their campuses by mid-August, I did take the time to meet one-on-one with dozens of single and married young adults in their twenties and early thirties. At the end of the summer, I pulled together a leadership team by contacting all of the young adults with whom I’d met during the summer, and asking them to join me. Almost thirty people responded, and we quickly set about the work of prayer, planning and visioning for our new ministry. We chose the name “Refuge” for our weekly gathering, in hopes that our ministry will become just that—a place of refuge where young adults who feel disconnected from God and from other people can find a savior and a community with whom they can face the storms of life.

Our leadership team split up into groups and visited notable young adult ministries in the Greater Houston area. After sharing our experiences of these visits, and our own desires for Refuge, we designed our weekly gatherings to reflect several key themes that ultimately became our tag line: “People. Coffee. God. Worship. Questions. Mission. Life.” Spreading the word through “Generation Y” advertising (i.e. a Web site, Facebook, MySpace, e-mail, text messages, word-of-mouth, etc.), we officially launched Refuge in the third week of September.

Gathering in Community

Each Thursday night at 7:00 (the day and time we determined would be best for our target demographic), guests are welcomed into a dimly-lit room adorned with flickering candles and artfully-designed altars and crosses. Beginning with an informal time of fellowship, young adults help themselves to flavored coffees and Italian sodas. A large group icebreaker introduces participants to new people, with whom they ultimately find a seat at one of ten round tables.

We then begin a time of worship led by one of four Refuge worship leaders, sharing testimonies, prayer, and communion. After worship, I share a brief, ten-minute message and then provide a few deep, relevant, and “in your business” discussion questions. (Perhaps this is why one brother calls Refuge “The Realist Hour of Your Week.”) Each table group then spends the remainder of the time (about twenty minutes) in candid, authentic discussion, sharing their answers to these questions. Refuge ends with an invitation, a challenge, and a closing worship song.

The most important thing about Refuge, however, is not the gathering itself. Refuge is designed to be a community. So immediately following our gatherings, everyone is invited to come out to our Refuge “after-party” at a nearby restaurant for food and hang out time. Once every few weeks we host a large group activity (e.g. bowling, laser tag, a concert, etc.) to have some fun and give young adults a chance to invite others to spend time with our community in an unimposing environment. Once a month we host a large group mission project (e.g. playground construction, home building, etc.) to give our young adults an opportunity to serve those in need.

Going Deeper

We also provide opportunities to build more intimate community throughout the week. Small groups for men, women, and couples meet in homes, restaurants, and coffee shops throughout our area. On Sunday evenings, young adults who are ready to dig deeply into their faith are invited to “Deeper”—a small gathering I lead to provide intensive study of scripture, challenging life applications, and an opportunity

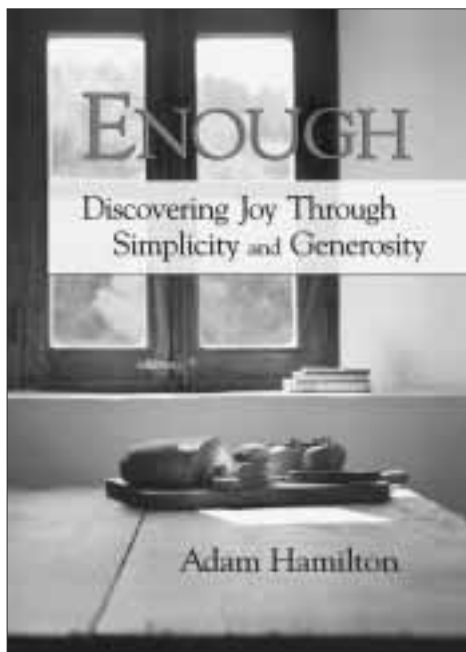
for one-on-one discipleship. Partnering with the youth ministry, a number of our young adults serve together as facilitators for high school Bible studies, table group leaders for weekly youth group gatherings, and counselors for youth retreats and camps.

In just two months, our weekly attendance grew to seventy young adults, and a total of almost 140 different individuals joined our community at some point in the fall. Although our church has provided this ministry with a generous amount of logistical, financial, and staff support, my strong belief is that these results have much more to do with the fact that young women and men are desperately searching for something—anything—to quench their deep spiritual thirst.

Our churches can serve as fountains of life to a thirsty generation, proclaiming (in the words of Isaiah 58:11) “The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.” □



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