

Achieving a Critical Mass of Young People

By Donna Schaper

My congregation in New York City has experienced a very welcome generational shift over the last several years. From an average age of sixty, we are now an average age of forty. From worship attendance averaging seventy-five, we now average 175. We have also added two evening services (Wednesday and Sunday evening), and increased our Sunday school enrollment from five to forty-five, with much of that coming from same-sex couples with adopted children. While we remain 90 percent white on Sunday morning, 80 percent of our Sunday school children are Chinese American and from the global South.

Many have asked *how* we did it. Although we did have an inarticulate hope that our church would get younger and more colorful, we did not make these changes systematically. No demographic goals were set. No worship music was changed or materials revised. We didn't even redecorate our dowdier spaces, although many of us suggested that we get rid of the old couches and mismatched furniture in the now too-small Sunday school area.

Instead, the shift happened as an accidental by-product of a leadership development effort. We got a grant to become a teaching congregation where seminarians could gain ministerial experience. Students from Union Seminary and New York Theological Seminary were hired as community ministers, five the first year and eleven the next. These new, younger staff members provided the critical mass to attract younger people. Once the leaders were younger, younger people came. It's no secret that people are more comfortable when they see others like themselves. One by one the young won't show. Three by three—or eleven by eleven—they might.

I'd like to say that I as the senior pastor am a young sixty-two-year-old, but the truth is my age shows, in my language, hair, and body. I once quoted Pogo, saying "We have met the enemy and he is us," a great line from the sixties, and no one in the new majority understood what I was saying. The old minority laughed. As one of our mature members said to another of our mature members who objected to Michael Jackson music and dance in the service, "Your generation gap is showing."



My generation gap shows. There is no way I could hide it, nor do I believe in hiding it. My role is to hold and open the space, not wear blue jeans and sneakers or get a tattoo. The more I am who I am, the more space is created for others to be who they are.

Because of the growth, we were able to hire a second minister, who is thirty-four, and he has been able to articulate the generational differences with humor and grace. "My past," he said in a recent sermon, "is not your past." He refers often to his nonauthoritarian parents and compares them to the legacy congregation's authoritarian parents. He assumes the older generation knows all about identity politics and postmodernism; we don't. He teaches us.

Stylistic Changes an Effect, Not Cause

While we did not shift our cultural or worshiping behavior at the beginning, we have now switched it in response to our newcomers. Sermons are shorter. Music is even more contemporary, diverse, and blended. Our new evening services are emphasized because young people sleep on Sunday mornings. (Duh.) Attention is paid to including newcomers on boards and committees.

The first year this "inclusion" did not go so well. One thirty-four year old Chinese American, an executive at Google, joined the board and made it through three longish, talkish meetings before he begged to be relieved. "I just don't do meetings like that. Thirty minutes is about all I can take. Decisions have to be made without so much discussion. It makes me nervous to sit through all that." He continued to offer his gifts by setting up a great website to accumulate data on hate speech. He travels frequently between San Francisco and New York, so we almost never see him, but he still acts in our Christmas play. We learned a lot from his departure. The best way to include younger people in congregational life is not in governance. They want service and study.

So we have opened a soup kitchen following our Wednesday night meditation service, not only to meet the growing need for food outside our door, but to provide a place for our newcomers to get hands-on. They make great food, show a free movie, clean up the mess, enjoy each other, and don't sit through a meeting.

This same group, under the leadership of a former community minister who is now associate pastor, opened a "Really, Really,

Really, Really Free Market” on Sunday afternoons. This glorified yard sale attracts hundreds of people who get free stuff, give free haircuts, and have booths to give free advice. In both of these events and in the Sunday afternoon “Feast of the Streets”—where dumpster divers show up with food they have found—there is a kind of irony that younger adults enjoy. It is funny and off beat. People don’t come out of sincere need, as in “I need food” or “I need to give.” Instead they come to see what happens. Then something happens.

The older generation does participate in all these activities. But they are in the minority and that matters. They like being led rather than leading in these situations and enjoy the lightness of the Wednesday evenings and the humor of Sundays.

Integrating New into Old

The demographic transition, so far, has been peaceful, even happy. I anticipated major resistance. These shifts are mostly welcomed, with only a small minority of people wondering if the “old place” has gone away. Compared to most congregations who experience significant change, we have had very little resistance to change. What little we have names itself out loud: “I used to be a big fish in a small sea and now I am not.” “I used to know everyone by name and now I don’t.” “I used to have a strong sense of identity at Judson and now I don’t.”

While I had predicted resistance, even selfishness, even the hoarding of our great buildings, legacies, and traditions, I was wrong. My older members don’t even like my nicknames for them. When I say “legacy congregation” and contrast it to “newer” congregation, I often get corrected. “Why label us?”

people ask. Similar resistance to generational boxes has happened among the younger generation. The less we talk about our differences, the better. The less we label, the better. The less we notice our ages and their limitations and gifts, the better. The less said about it, the better. Generations want to connect, but not by way of competing or quarreling over ways and means.

The older congregation welcomed their children home. Some of their own offspring, those who live in New York, actually returned. We see mother and daughter sitting together in worship and other intergenerational—while not biological—friendships developing.

We are finding our way to an intergenerational faith. I don’t think we knew the way. We ended up with diversity in our midst because younger people saw other younger people there in a significant enough number to make them feel welcome. Now that community is changing how we worship, think, act. □



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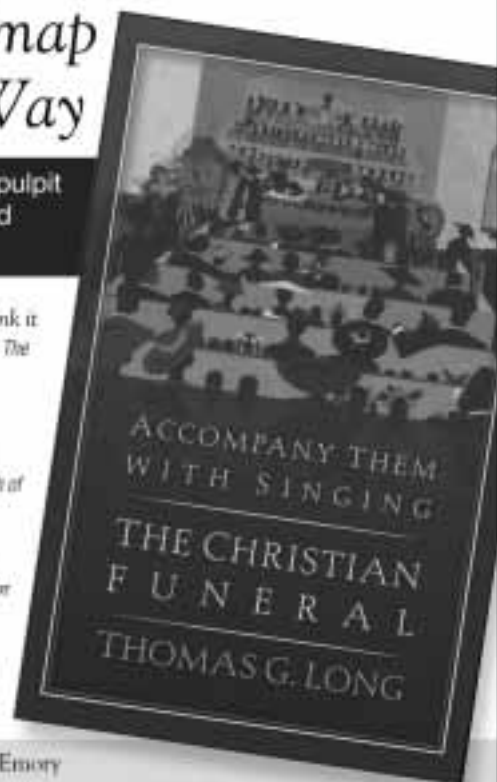
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