

by Thomas K. Chu

Good News for Young Adults

(A version of this article first appeared in Disorganized Religion: The Evangelization of Youth and Young Adults, Sheryl Kujawa, editor, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998. This title may be purchased; also a free single copy of the book can be ordered from <http://www.episcopalparishservices.org/displayrecord.asp?EntryCode=DISORG>)

In examining the area of evangelism with young adults, we realize not only that we have refined our ideas about human and faith development to include young adulthood as a discrete area of study, but also that the context for our ministry has shifted within the span of our lifetime. It is not difficult to see that young adults are absent from our congregations, our ministries, and our decision-making bodies in proportion to the general population, and the anxiety this raises about the church's future is part of the motivation for this study. In this essay I will raise some of the generational and developmental issues facing young adults and explore the scope of our ministry and mission to people between the ages of 18 and 30.

Today's young adults have been shaped by some common social and cultural experiences:

- Television and other electronic media. Not only do they spend more and more time in a passive posture, young adults see the world as fast-paced, complex, and entertaining while being weak on the fundamentals.
- Unstable families. Fathers are often absent, and mothers are usually working outside the home.
- Collapsing institutions. At almost every turn, institutions such as health care, criminal justice, religion, education, and government services are failing.
- Receding expectations. Fewer expect that the continually escalating cost of college education will actually result in a full-time, well-paying job. The available positions are more likely to be marginal and part-time with few benefits, with the result that many people in their early twenties live with their parents, at the highest rates since the Great Depression.

Yet among the younger of today's young adults, born after 1981 (sometimes referred to as Millennials, Echo Boomers, or GenY), there are some contrasting qualities due in some part to deferred childbearing, the wider use of fertility therapies, and the experience of being wished-for as children:

- special
- sheltered
- confident
- team-oriented
- achieving
- pressured
- conventional

continued...

groundwork

MINISTRY WITH YOUNG ADULTS & "NEXT GENERATIONS"

GO

What does this combination of factors result in but a deep cynicism that is in some ways well founded? Bombarded by advertising from every direction, and aware of the cycles of “planned obsolescence” of products and services, even children suspect they are being manipulated by the market. One can safely assume that those in leadership positions — politicians, CEOs — promote primarily their own self-interest over and above any sense of the “common good.” It seems that the lessons to be learned by young adults from those in authority today are that people with wealth and power should consolidate their positions, and continue to do so. Knowledge becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, to turn the criminal justice system to one’s own side, to avoid paying taxes, to benefit “me and mine.”

In our own lives, we are distracted by a combination of “busy-ness” and consumerism. Some are working harder and longer hours to buy things they do not need, while others are working just as hard to meet their basic human needs for housing, food, and health care. In either case, many are overwhelmed yet at the same time have little to show for their fatigue. Given this reality, what suffers? Our health, time, and space for family nurture, opportunities for community engagement, and true leisure. In such an environment it is easy to be cynical, and to write off any commitment to others or to the “common good” as a veiled act of enlightened self-interest.

Where do the different parts of any community come together and share a sense of participation and responsibility? Although the common ground of town meeting, coffee shop, bodega, and general store still exists in some places today, it is mostly gone. Publicly shared spaces of main streets and parks have been supplanted and displaced by private shopping malls and atriums. Contemporary daily existence does not have room for much more than an occasional greeting from a retailer or service provider. As architects and planners try to combat this alienation, we are presented with yet more privatized expressions of nearly public space.

In *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, Laurent A. Parks Daloz and his colleagues outline the shape of what they call the “new commons,” where common ground is electronic, alienated, anonymous, and fleeting.¹ Even when we are with many strangers in a crowded restaurant or a packed elevator, we are alone together, or together alone. Yet not all of the changes that our culture has experienced have been negative. The increase and ease of communication and international travel means a greater, if not a deeper, sense of interdependence as a planetary community. Boundaries have shifted and blurred between work and home, secular and religious, social and natural environments, male and female, “we” and “they.”

How do young adults cope with these changing contours? Some respond by compartmentalizing their personal lives and corporate lives, maintaining parallel and often competing value systems, suspending discernment and judgment when necessary. For example, Paul is a successful financial analyst for a Fortune 500 company whose policies and goals are geared toward profit at the expense of the environment, but on weekends he gives his time to the Nature Conservancy. Michelle faces discrimination on the job yet says very little about it, even to her colleagues. No one seems interested — and besides, there is a difference between ethics and “the real world.” These are incomplete and fragmented ways of dealing with the world, but they are a reality for more people than we would like to think, even for ourselves as people concerned and struggling with issues of faith.

Hypocrisy in our current atmosphere of cynicism is easy to detect.

Layered upon this reality is the paradox of the world getting larger and smaller at the same time, becoming more complex, with ever more communications and information competing for attention. This complexity does not invite easy and pat answers to questions, but rather indicates the need for a keener recognition of diversity and ambiguity, a greater capacity for connection, and more creative, reflective, and strategic responses to suffering and difficult problems in the world.

How do we address these realities as bearers of the good news of the gospel? In what ways can we be available to young adults who are both cynical and questioning?

First of all, each of us has opportunities in our daily work to demonstrate the presence of Jesus Christ. It is incumbent on us to offer our stories and make invitations to others — and not only for their sake. For our own well-being we also need to have good friends along the way for study, discussion, mutual challenge, and support.

Next, consider becoming a “threshold person” who can offer relationships to young adults that span the generation gap. In your life and work, take care to challenge, support, and inspire young adults. Be someone who can discuss ambiguity and complexity with integrity, and help young adults move beyond cynicism to a healthy skepticism, with greater awareness and more questioning and dialogue.

This can only be done by embodying commitment oneself. The etymology of commitment — from the Latin *cum* (with) and *mittere* (send) — implies a relationship rather than merely a personal choice; one is drawn out or led by a force beyond oneself. By whom are we sent? For what mission or purpose are we sent? What keeps us focused? In ministering to young adults, foster a sense of vocation (from Latin *vocare* — to be called) and be clear about your own calling in relation not only to your work and profession, but to the wider world and to all of creation. We can “teach the ropes” or help a young adult “climb the corporate ladder,” but we are challenged to convey the vision and good news of what the world can become, a world that is reconciled to God and to itself.

Knowing that our “new commons” may demand new skills to fulfill new tasks, we may find ourselves learning to be good company for the journey rather than “teaching the ropes.” So much of our institutional learning has revolved around the “banking theory” of education: placing material inside someone’s head to be drawn out when the time for exams comes around, just as money in a bank account is drawn out with a check. Teacher and philosopher Paolo Freire condemns this approach in favor of “dialogical” education, where the human person, by virtue of being, has a “vocation to be a subject,” not an object.²

Sharon Parks, in her landmark work *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith and Commitment*, expands the well-known faith development work of James Fowler in *Stages of Faith*. Where Fowler offers six stages of faith development, Parks makes the apt observation that there is a unique stage of questioning in the young adult years, which includes what she calls “probing commitment,” a self-aware search for inner authority to discern truth and a “fragile inner-dependence” not connoting weakness, but the fragility of trial and exploration.³ For those of us extending hospitality and acting

as evangelists along the way, an invitation is implied at this stage to relationship and sharing, to questioning and listening, to openness and engagement. In such a relationship of clarifying values and commitment, faith is embodied as an activity that Parks calls *meaning-making*.

She offers a helpful metaphor of faith as meaning-making in H. Richard Niebuhr's phrase "shipwreck, gladness, and amazement." In the experience of dealing with a disaster or threat to one's sense of self, God, and the world, one enters a cycle of "shipwreck," or shattering of reality, then "gladness," or relief that one has survived, then "amazement," or a deepening of faith.⁴ Rather than a linear understanding of faith development, Niebuhr implies something more like a spiral or a helix. One scriptural story that might illuminate this point is that of the shipwreck told in Acts 27. It is often at these critical junctures of reality being shattered or significantly challenged that young adults seek connections with other persons or communities of faith.

On the corporate level, how do we prepare our congregations to be receptive and welcoming to young adults? The relational work of individual evangelists must be continued in the context of a celebrating community. One of the greatest gifts of our liturgical tradition is the intactness and richness of images, symbols, stories, ritual, and song that we have inherited. In a world that is immersed in commercial and disposable visual and symbolic language, there is a great potential for the symbolic action that is enacted through liturgical celebrations.

However, we can no longer take for granted that even those who received traditional Sunday school instruction in their childhood years will understand the meaning of so many layers of tradition. As an example, the symbols of water and the Spirit in baptism refer to many images and stories that few besides regular churchgoers recognize and recall. In a way, every Eucharist needs to be an instructed Eucharist, and perhaps our liturgical gestures need to be less streamlined and abbreviated but bolder and more public. It is imperative that our liturgy not become a living museum for students of only English culture and music.

Furthermore, our observances, programs, public ministry, and outreach constantly need to reach in two directions, offering ways to make meaning out of living. This can only be done in relationship. For the sake of our own integrity and wholeness, it cannot mean a vision of faith communities as places merely for pause and refreshment. As educator Maria Harris tells us in *Proclaim Jubilee!*, spirituality not only is withdrawing, turning inward, and attending to God and one's inner self, but must also be deeply involved with and engaged in the world.⁵ In terms of scope, we can and should recast our modern concept of the parish to see it as a geographic and social area of responsibility for ministry rather than a church building.

What good news does the Episcopal Church have to share with young adults today? Our tradition honors the intellect and individual discernment in surroundings of communal relationships and ritual celebration. The good news, however, is not only embodied in the sayings and teachings of Jesus Christ, but is also rooted in the Hebrew scriptures and the prophetic tradition, one in which God chooses sides and calls people to account.

Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus' return to the synagogue at Nazareth, where he read from the scroll of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

The passage from Isaiah continues:

to provide for those who mourn in Zion
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory (Isaiah 61:3).

At the end of the reading, Jesus rolled up the scroll and sat down, as was the custom, and then said to the congregation, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing — (Luke 4:21). Perhaps as contemporary Christians we forget the urgency of this good news. Good news is not like today's lukewarm "human-interest news" relegated to the last segment of the evening news, but the kind of news worthy of sending a herald to tell others about it. God's choice of the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed "to display his glory," is surely good news. Now is the time "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." When the church has achieved this wholeness, Maria Harris tells us, it can bring together the hallowing of time, gathering the people, probing the word, breaking the bread, and repairing the world.⁶ Or as the prophet Micah exhorts us, we are "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God" (6:8).

All of these statements are radically integrative, and our vision, interpretation, and strategies need to reflect this. Yes, there are political, economic, social, psychological, and spiritual ramifications to embracing good news for ourselves and for others. We are called to create or reform inclusive communities that do justice, extend love, and practice mercy, that proclaim the good news by what they do as well as by what they preach — lively communities that "do what they say and say what they do." We are also called to extend hospitality to all, which means extending our boundaries. As we saw in the words from the prophet Isaiah, God chooses precisely those who are traditionally outside the bounds to hear the gospel. This extension of hospitality may alter our sense of time and space, of what is comfortable and customary, of who is "in" and who is "out."

Our preaching and teaching are to encourage dialogue and develop compassion, as well as to offer insights that acknowledge the complexities of the world. Celebrating and probing the word should give comfort but also challenge us to action, to our common vocation of repairing the world. We need to make space and time for pause, reflection, and assessment. The "year of the Lord's favor" in Luke 4 refers to the Jubilee tradition of letting the land lie fallow; in the same way our personal lands need time for pause, reflection, and

assessment. More than any other institution in our society, the church must understand the necessity of pause and sabbath time, and learn to make better use of it.

Finally, we need to be aware of our changing social context. Just as Jesus knew the audience who was listening to his teaching and addressed each listener in a way that each would understand, we too need to be sensitive and adaptable to a social context that is increasingly multicultural, formed and informed by technology and science, and globally connected. This may affect our style and idiom, but not the content of the gospel we proclaim.

In all of these suggestions lies the basic premise of applying the specialized knowledge of young adults and their needs to what is the primary vocation of the church: to reconcile people with God and each other. When evangelists are doing their work of invitation and formation and communities of faith are doing the work they are called to do, when teachers and mentors are true partners along the way, God's will for justice, love, and mercy be done. ■

Endnotes

¹ Laurent A. Daloz, et al., *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

² Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Press, 1989), 58-59.

³ Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 84-88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-27.

⁵ Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee!: A Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.