



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

YOUNG ADULTS AS A MISSION FIELD

I am a minister today (having been one now for over three decades, in fact!) because a congregation about a generation ago decided to start thinking of the young adults in their neighborhood as a MISSION FIELD rather than as future curators of that church's sterling 150+ year legacy.

In the late 1960s Park Street Congregational Church, known to tourists as *Stop No. 3* on Boston's historic Freedom Trail, decided to invest (yes, I think that is the right word) some of their financial resources in a young, full time minister who would work exclusively with college students and young working people.

While the church had hosted a relatively small fellowship group for young adults for many years, this group never quite seemed to fulfill its potential—hence the decision to make a concentrated effort to attract and minister to the rapidly growing number of baby boomer adults migrating into the Boston area.

The most important thing that these far-sighted church members did, I think, was to recognize that if their church was to become an attractive gathering place for young adults, they needed to “get out of the way” and let these long-haired, ill-clothed, odd-mannered “boomers” do church in a way that was meaningful to their generation.

And that's what these older adults did. They simply ignored the things about the younger generation they did not much care for, while giving much verbal support to the overall program run by the new minister with his unconventional ideas about young adults ministry.

In short order these young adults developed their own worship services and educational programs, which were VERY different from the staid and venerable style of church programming traditionally practiced by the congregation.

For example, young adults worship lasted an hour and a half—and sometimes longer! It consisted of lots of “Christian folk” singing (if old hymns were sung, they were often sung in an up-tempo way), followed by sharing in small groups about things participants learned in their private study of the Bible, followed by public sharing about personal concerns to pray for, followed by prayer itself, and then concluding with more singing. Obviously, a bulletin and many of the other normal accoutrements of worship services were completely unnecessary.

The whole body of young adults was organized into small discipleship groups that met weekly in college dorms and private apartments all over the Boston area. Leaders came together for two-to-three hours *each week*, spending more of the meeting time in Bible study discussion and mutual prayer than in dealing with the details of the burgeoning ministry.

Since no one was “born” into the group (almost all were singles), growth could only occur by everyone reaching out to classmates and neighbors, inviting them to fun events like volleyball gatherings, beach trips, and weekend retreats.

As one might expect, these college students and young working adults were highly mobile and hence quite transient. They came to Boston from God-knows-where, stayed for four years to get their education or work their first job, and then they went somewhere else “to settle down.”

But when they left, they took with them a vibrant faith in God, an understanding of how to do effective ministry in the Church, and a passion for the mission of Jesus Christ. That's why these young people came to be thought of as a MISSION FIELD rather than as minor leaguers in training to take over the “big league” positions of their elders at some distant future date.

A few did hang around and eventually became the deacons and trustees of the congregation. But most flew the coop—and that was okay, since the goal was to bless the worldwide Church and not just Park Street Congregational Church.

By the late 1970s as I was finishing seminary, the number of collegians, grad students, and young working people participating each week in worship, fellowship, instruction and evangelism at PSC averaged well over 300. And from this *church within a church* scores of young people went into full time Christian ministry, including several dozen who became Third World missionaries.

So that's how I got the “call” to become a minister.

We boomers are now the “old guard” (as we used to say of the people of our parents' generation); and it is *our* children who are the new young adults. I find that their take on traditional church today is much like ours was back then: “It just doesn't meet our needs or inspire our participation,” they say to me privately.

I have come to the conclusion that the congregations of the Penn Northeast Conference will *ONLY* be able to pass their spiritual legacy on to the next generation if they begin *now* to invest in the young adults who live in the communities around them as though these Gen-X'ers & Y'ers were a MISSION FIELD.

To do this successfully, we've got to give them ample room to carve out their own way of doing church. Seriously. To demand they do it *our way or else* will surely bring to an end nearly three centuries of Reformed (UCC) piety in these lovely northeastern Pennsylvania hills and valleys.

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