

## The Mystery of Young Adult Ministry

By Katie Livingood, Synod Communications Director

I have a confession. I am a young adult. I am involved in the church. And I feel alone.

Over and over again I hear people ponder the reality of the lack of young adults in church. The trend is that they leave after confirmation or high school, and maybe they will come back again when they have children. With this in mind, I asked what are young adults seeking? What is keeping them away from the church? What young adult ministries have been successful?

Each person who is not active in a church has very personal reasons for choosing not to be involved, but there are a few themes that come up over and over again. Often young adults do have an interest in participating but just do not fit in. As I mentioned, I feel alone in church because I am one of the few young adults, fewer still without children, in worship.

In response to a Facebook inquiry, a young woman named Carrie replied that she feels isolated for similar reasons. She adds, "My age (and the lack of wedding ring on my finger) made me stick out like a sore thumb." Others, like Rachel, feel that their age marks them as outsiders brings judgement. Amber echoed Rachel's feelings. She felt like she was targeted and analyzed. Even questions that may be well-intended, for Rachel and Amber, came across and singling-out, questions like "How was it?" and "How can we help you?" Amber said it feels like "being befriended with a motive."

Rev. Amy Thompson Sevimli is an assistant to the bishop in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod, ELCA. When she was called to the position two and a half years ago, she was asked to spend half of her time on young adult ministry. The synod's bishop, Rev. Richard Graham, saw a need for this emphasis when he realized how many young people were moving into Washington, D.C. This year the synod is in "The Year of

the Young Adult," an emphasis intended to bring awareness to this ministry and encourage congregations to consider it as part of their identity.

Sevimli started her work by spending six months connecting with young adults and talking with them about their reasons for not attending church. Through networking, she was able to connect with people all over the metro area and asked them three main questions:

1. Why don't you go to church?
2. What keeps you away?
3. What do you think of Jesus?

She found that many had been very turned off by church and needed the time to vent about their experiences, but they were very intrigued by Jesus. Even if they were undecided about the divinity of Jesus, they wanted to learn more.

Kristen Glass, ELCA Director for Young Adult Ministries, says many young adults have questions about vocation, what it means to be Christian and Lutheran, and living out their faith. Most ministries, however, target those who are already in the door looking for answers rather than reaching out to young adults where they are. Young adults, she says, are typically drawn in by personal invitations and by witnessing the church working in the community.

When I asked congregations what they were doing for young adult ministry, most of the answers I received were that congregations see a need for young adult ministry but do not have anything to offer. Many of the young adult ministry groups that do exist are similar to those created for any demographic that have been done in churches for generations. The groups tend to be centered on fellowship, service, and/or study.

One such group is the Casserole Club of St. John's Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minn., featured in the November 2009 issue of *The Lutheran* magazine. Rev. Meta Carlson, the congregation's young associate pastor, realized there was nothing available in the church specifically for people her age. She reached out to congregation members, friends, and the wider community to invite 20-somethings to gather for a low-cost, home-cooked meal and Bible study. She utilized the Facebook network to spread the invitation around the neighborhood, and the group's communication continues to take place on Facebook. The message Carlson sent



*Young adults seek answers to many life questions, including questions about vocation, finances, relationships, and faith.*

with her invitations and Facebook presence was that this was a casual group and anyone was welcome, with or without previous church experience, and there was no pressure to become a member.

Another group gathers at Zion Lutheran Church, Stewartville, Minn. Rev. Emily Carson, another young pastor just out of seminary, organized the group around a variety of events, including attending baseball games and having cookouts. Each time the group gathers, they brainstorm an activity for the next gathering. Carson has found that many of the members have recently re-experienced the church after bringing their young children to be baptized, but do not regularly attend worship. The people who take part are looking for community and a way to get out of the house without having to commit to another regular item in their already over-scheduled lives.

On Facebook, a young woman named Jamie said of her congregation's 20-somethings group, "It's still nice to be reminded that there are still some lingering folks from my youth group, plus some folks who are just a little older than me who are at my church."

When the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod began



*"Casserole Clubs" are popping up all over the country! Retro is in, and it seems the familiarity and "good ol' days" tradition of hot dishes can be a draw for young adults.*

planning for youth ministry, they started modeling it after youth ministry with retreats and synod-wide events. They did have some success, especially with the happy hours. After several months of focusing on this type of programming, the question arose, "Where is this going?" Since then, the focus has moved away from events-based ministry and toward support and resourcing for congregations to carry out their own youth ministry. Often this takes the form of small groups within the congregation.

Much of Glass' work with ELCA Young Adult Ministry is to connect networks of people who work with young adults to share resources and ideas. She offered several ideas of how to reach out to young adults. One is to include the young adults who are already members. Before casting a wide net into the community, connect with the people who are already a part of the congregation. This includes the people who did not move away from their home community after high school. They are already tied into the community but are often neglected in outreach ministries. It may also include new members who do not participate in worship because they do not see other young adults present.

Many congregations think that to draw in young people, they have to play contemporary music or have the latest technology. While that appeals to some, people who work with young adult ministry are finding that young adults most concerned with having authentic worship experiences. Glass cited a Chicago-area Catholic church that began offering Latin masses and saw a surge of young adult participation. Latin mass is not the only answer. Whatever type of

## Starting a Young Adult Group? Ask...

- What does "young adult" mean to you?
- Why start a YA group?
- Is it the YAs' idea or older adults' want to start it for them? If YAs are not involved yet, how will you incorporate them in the early stages of the process?
- What is the group's focus - outreach, spiritual formation, worship-oriented, fellowship, networking, support?
- What expectations do you have for the group?
- How involved (if at all) do you expect the members of the group to be in the life of the congregation?
- How does the rest of the congregation embrace multi-generational ministry with this age group?
- Have you talked to YAs outside the congregation?
- Are you expecting other YAs from outside the congregation to participate? If so, where do you see them coming from?
- Do you envision this group to be solely Lutheran or do you see it encompassing other denominations as well?
- What kind of financial support is available for this group? What other resources can this group tap into (i.e. meeting space, curriculum, food, etc.)?
- How will decisions be made?
- What are the responsibilities of the group leader(s)?
- What support system is there for the leader(s) of the group?
- Is the group leader(s) compensated in any way?
- How will the group react if consistently there is low, irregular attendance?

worship rings true in the community can be authentic. Jazz music in a jazz service makes sense. Camp songs in an otherwise traditional liturgical service do not feel authentic. If worship stops being about worship and starts being about the coolest music or the best coffee, there is little to hold a person's attention since those things are available at the café down the street any time.

In a comment on Facebook, Tim critiqued churches that try to be something they are not. He said "If you're going to be a church, or a religious organization, then be that - you don't also need to be the Boys & Girls Club, the local indie Coffee Shop, and you most certainly do NOT need to be the local Night/Dance Club - you just need to be a church."

Although young adults can be critical of attempts to lure them in using the latest music, technology, and trends, those things *can* still appeal to young adults if they are a part of the congregation's identity. Jacob's Well is a congregation in Minneapolis. They worship at two area schools. They plan to stay intentional about meeting in public places to stay part of the community and avoid some of the stigma of "church." Jacob's Well was started when Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, realized they were a vibrant, but traditional, church. They were not right for everyone, so Rev. Greg Meyer left Bethlehem to help develop this new ministry.

Jacob's Well has established itself as the "church for people who don't like church." They rethink everything about how to "do" church for those not at home in a traditional congregation. Meyer says that this includes valuing good questions more than definitive answers, utilizing multimedia (even encouraging congregants to text him questions during the worship service!), and encouraging people to share stories about their everyday faith and service. Despite the differences between Jacob's Well and other ministries, the two things that continue to be present are relationships and community.

There is no cookie cutter available for young adult ministry. Young adults can be a jaded, transient, and elusive population, making it difficult for congregations to reach out. No matter where they are, though, there is a trend of seeking meaningful relationships, service to others, in-depth study, and authentic worship. Reaching out individually, creating small groups, and deliberate worship planning can all be a part of the way a congregation ministers to young adults.

### *Want to explore more?*

Contact Katie Livingood ([livingood@semnsynod.org](mailto:livingood@semnsynod.org), 507-280-9457, or 800-426-6376 in Minnesota if you would like to have conversation on young adult ministry.

## WATER: Facts & Acts

*From Lutheran World Relief - [www.lwr.org](http://www.lwr.org)*



**FACT:** Water covers more than 70 percent of the earth's surface but only one percent is available as fresh water. — Oneworld.net

**ACT:** With such precious little water, many of the world's people simply cannot access fresh water, especially after emergencies and disasters. Try taking shorter showers and turning off the tap while you are brushing your teeth. Little actions go a long way toward conserving our earth's precious water supply!

**FACT:** 5 million children die annually from water related diseases. — Oneworld.net

**ACT:** Children can be responsible global citizens too! Encourage them to look for ways to conserve water in your home. Get the whole family involved by starting a "spare change" jar that, once filled, can be given as a gift to support LWR water projects.

**FACT:** The average distance that women in Africa and Asia walk to collect water is six kilometers. — Blue Planet Run Foundation

**ACT:** The time spent collecting water could be used getting an education or earning income. Help shorten her walk by supporting LWR water projects, which help install wells and water collection systems, giving communities more convenient water sources.

**FACT:** 1.8 million people die every year from diarrheal diseases due to unsafe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene sources. — UNESCO

**ACT:** Following a disaster or emergency, clean water can make the difference between life and death. LWR provides emergency water filters following emergencies to ensure people stay healthy and can rebuild their lives. Give an emergency water filter through LWR Gifts to a loved one for a birthday or special occasion ([lwr.org/gifts](http://lwr.org/gifts)).

**FACT:** In 20 years, water shortages may affect two-thirds of the world's population. — Center for Economic & Social Rights

**ACT:** Climate change threatens to make water shortages even worse. The poorest of the poor will be most severely affected as they already lack water access. The good news is there's something you can DO about it. Visit [lwr.org/advocacy](http://lwr.org/advocacy) to learn how you can speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves!