

Youth and Religion Project

Module 2

"Church" in Black and White

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Much of today's presentation is a discussion of the idea of "generation" and how that is reflected in the practices of youth ministry within churches. To summarize, we claim that for many churches young people are treated as a distinct "generation," one with unique experiences, unique perspectives, and best able to relate to age-peers. Other churches treat youth more as a "phase" or "stage" in the life-cycle, during which youth have particular needs. But those needs do not require them to be segregated from other generations - quite the contrary, those needs require that they interact with and learn from their elders.

We illustrated this distinction with examples from two churches, one white and one black. Of course, we want to be careful about making generalizations about racial differences that are too sweeping (we have some reservations about William Myers' book on that very basis). But we have also seen differences in the way black and white college-age kids talk about their religion and their church involvement. In a sound bite, where our white student respondents were interested in religion, our black student respondents were involved with religion.

Of course there are many similarities. College is a period of exploration, doubt, sometimes experimentation. The received patterns of youth have to be - at the very least - consciously decided upon. Particularly for those who go away to college, parents are no longer around to "force" one to go to church. Personal autonomy is both an issue and a value.

In religious belief and religious practices, this autonomy produces a particular "talk" about searching, choices, and attempting to discern what is best for oneself. There is often a great deal of "church shopping," even if one wants to stay within one's denomination of origin.

And yet, in individual interviews and in focus group sessions with black and white students at Southern Illinois University, we found some distinct differences in how students talk about their religious involvements (we also found some distinct patterns in how students discuss their beliefs, but at the moment our concern is with organizational involvement). Here we present examples of the "talk," what sociologists call the "discourse" - the sets of assumptions, phrases, and metaphors - that black and white students use to explain and understand their own church involvement or lack thereof.

The major difference we found is that white students discuss their religious involvements in terms of what they need from a religious organization at that point in their lives. They tend to see religion's positive influence in their lives in terms of personal life and happiness, and express their doubts in terms of personal questioning. In that sense, they have what might be called a "client" orientation to the church, and treat their involvement in it as largely voluntary. Black students, on the other hand, credit religion and church involvement with helping them in college, either keeping them out of trouble or providing a support system for them. Black students discuss church involvement using "family" metaphors - that is, with the same kinds of language that one uses for familial relationships. Family relationships are not voluntary - we may not like family but we are pretty much stuck with them.

There is an important distinction here - white students often spoke of their church history and involvement in terms of their family - but they meant their blood kin, such as parents, siblings, and their own prospective children. Black students did this as well - although we note how much more often extended family (especially female relatives such as grandmothers and aunts) showed up in black students' accounts than in white students. But our point is that black students were more likely to use the discourse of family to describe what church is and should be - church was so often described with metaphors of it being "like family" or relationships that are "called" rather than chosen. Black students often did a remarkable amount of "church shopping" - after all, these are kids who are away at college. But when they explained the "church homes" they found they used the language of the "home church" - the place where they felt as enmeshed in familial-type relationships as they did when they lived with their families of origin.

Let's consider some quotes from both individual and focus group interviews with white students. White students often described childhood experiences in the church, and many describe getting involved with religion during crisis points in their lives. But for many, church involvement, per se, is usually distinct from religion. For example, some students separate "organized religion" from true religious beliefs, and often make a distinction between "religion" and "spirituality." The emphasis is on individual autonomy and personal decision making, with a basic attitude that considers religious organizations as largely optional:

. . going to church no more would make you a good Christian than going into a garage would make you a car.

I actually asked my mom why I have to go to church if I believe. . .She said she thought that going to church made everybody come together. . .You know, like, I was like, whatever.

I don t ever remember questioning the existence of God, but I started to question the institution.

well, I don t really believe in organized religion at all

I still call myself Baptist but I don t agree with everything in the established religion. I kind of just got my own little thing, you know.

. . some of the rules and regulations they have don t fit in with the world. Like in our religion you re not supposed to get a divorce . . why should you have to stay with somebody that s giving you nothing good?

I asked [my friend] where she was going and she said the training. . I said what . . are you training for? And she said to go to church . . I was like, to do that is so stupid! If you talk about religion as being accepting of all kinds of different people then they shouldn t make them train to be good enough to come and worship God.

you don t have to go to church to be religious. . . I tend to like the word spiritual better than religion because to me the word religious has a lot of dogma attached to it.

[my friend] was raised very, very strict and it made her completely rebel against everything. Against God and against everything that s right . . she s now 21 years old, and her mom throws a fit if she misses church . . I was raised more like I could believe whatever I want . . I was a lot better and didn t rebel like she did.

Clearly these students remain concerned with religion - after all, they attended our focus groups. But the church as an institution is either irrelevant to them or a hindrance to spiritual development. They look for a church to fit what they perceive as their spiritual needs, not a place that will keep them on the right path or give them a needed community. One young woman describes her search for a church in terms of how it suited her personally:

...it s not about going to church, it s about personal relationship...it s not forced...[my friend] asked me, do you want to go to a church that teaches you what I m teaching you? .. I went with him to the church...it was really cool...it was really good for me at first...[but] there were problems with the people there. They were too judgmental. If you did things a little different, they wouldn t like it....So, it became too judgmental for

me and I stopped going to that church after about five years.....let me tell you what I did after I left...I worked on my own personal relationship with God. I did it with my friends. We had our own church....we all would get together and have our own church.

Nonetheless, many white students saw enough value in their religious upbringing to want to pass at least some of it on to their own prospective children:

I will regulate my [future] kids...I learned a lot of my morals at church, a lot of what's right. I learned what the Church thinks is right anyway...It was good for me, and was ... a positive thing in my life. So I would want my kids to experience that as well. And if they didn't want to I wouldn't make them.

I am happy that they made me go when I was little, but I am not so sure that I am happy that they made me do it once I entered high school... I think once you reach a certain age, you are to the point when you can decide for yourself.

I'll make my kids go, but not every Sunday.

Contrast the quotes above - and the "discourse" about religion they represent - with the selections below from black students. Note that several of the black students haven't found a church home and some don't attend as much as they used to. But notice how they describe what it is they are looking for - it is not about personal happiness and satisfaction alone. It is about being part of a community, making a public witness (not just personal morality), and finding the types of relationships that family offer (references to "down here" mean while in Carbondale attending SIU; these students are overwhelmingly from the greater Chicago area).

I wish I was involved a little bit more, like in a community. Like back at home.

I looked for a place where the Word of God would be preached. That is very hard to find.

I am still in the process of looking for a church home.. . I really do not desire to forsake the fellowship of believers.. . it's really very hard for me not to be in fellowship.

My spiritual growth . . . needs . . . some feeding. It's not just about me getting fed, obviously. It's also about what I give back by coming to worship the Lord as well.

Getting involved in church down here has kept me out of trouble. I have gotten involved in church activities. It keeps me focused on God and on my studies and on my grades . . . I am just thankful that I stayed in church when I came to college.

I m glad I go to church now, like she [another focus group participant] said she doesn t go to church now. That can be good because you can drag yourself crazy looking for the right church, but I like going to church.

I got down here and started enjoying the Voices of Inspiration Choir [in which she participates]. So really for me, it was like church was basically just on Sunday. That was it. As far as Bible study, we would go every now and then. But now that I ve come down here I go more often. It s more close knit.

Church involvement is matter of family connection, for both black and white students. But compare the following discussion about raising children in the church among black students with the white students' quotes about children listed above:

[W]hen I have children, I want us to go to church together. I won t tell them they have to go to a Pentecostal church or a Baptist church or Catholic. They can choose where they want to worship the Lord.

I m going to feed them [giving children religious instruction] until they re fat and they can t take no more. I m going to guide them until they feel they can make the right decisions. . I m not going to try to be a new-age parent - oh, I m not going to do this to my kids because it s a different age. I will guide my kids to the light.

The people in my church I have known them ever since I was a little girl. We all grew up together. . . it s not just like just religion, it s my friends and my family are there. We are like a community within a community. We are all there. We are all there to support each other.

Thus, the black students see religious involvement as integral to their identity. It supports them, it provides them with personal discipline, and it reminds them that they are public representatives of the faith. Where white students worried about a potential "stigma" of church membership that would restrict or inhibit their relationships with others, black students discussed church membership as a type of "insulation" that helped them resist temptation (especially "cute guys"). Church involvement, in sum, is a social factor for black students, not just a personal one. And while family connection is important to both groups, black students conceptualized even non-family church relations as a type of "fictive kin." Church involvement is "like a family" as well as being "with family."

We believe that at least some of this difference in discourse is connected to the different ways in which youth ministry is organized in black and white churches. Black youth are integrated into the congregational community across generations - they are and remain part of a larger community just as they stay more connected to extended family. White youth are often treated as if they are distinct from other generations, with development of their personal autonomy as the highest good.

Obviously, developing personal autonomy, trust in one's individual judgment, and the like are important processes and skills. And many white youth do not in fact face as risky a world as black students trying to make it in college. Nonetheless, we want to call attention to the deep sense of connection in the way black college students talk about their personal faith and their church involvement. We think the Protestant mainline could find some useful lessons there.

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