

Youth and Religion Project

Module 5

Ministering to Young Adults/Ministering to a New Generation: Are They The Same?

R. Stephen Warner and Rhys H. Williams
University of Illinois at Chicago

In the midst of the Summer 2000 project of the Youth and Religion Project, one of our research teams--the one that had been canvassing mostly suburban churches--came back with news of an exciting new, Gen-X oriented youth ministry they'd heard about and gone to investigate. Called "Centerpoint" [a pseudonym], it brought together hundreds of college-age and twenty-something young people on Saturday night for an hour-and-a-quarter long service of praise and worship, dramatic skits and teaching held in a large multi-purpose room down a wide corridor from the main sanctuary. During the service, the music is loud and the lights are low, and huge TV screens project the faces of the musicians, the actors, and the speaker so that even those in the back can feel their closeness. The music, skit, and teaching are hip and contemporary but all play variations on one unabashedly religious theme, which on Warner's first trip was "trusting God's promises." Those who arrive early wait expectantly for the doors to open (where, 10 minutes before the service, the line feels a bit like going to the movies). Those who want to stay afterward to discuss the evening's theme or just to visit are invited to a simulated living room at one side of the auditorium. And those who want to ponder the message on their own are invited to visit the ministry's web site. So far as we could tell, very few were over forty (Warner felt 20 years older than the next oldest person in the room, though he felt he would fit into the crowd in the church outside). (We later learned that the person in charge was in fact over 40.)

With an average weekend attendance of a thousand in two services, Centerpoint was by all odds the most popular of a dozen or so similar young adult ministries we looked at that summer. These ministries had several things in common on the surface: an informal, not-like-church, setting and casual dress among all participants, including whoever was to give the message; an overhead projector (or in the case of Centerpoint, closed-circuit TV) instead of hymnals; live contemporary music, always featuring guitars, keyboards, and drums, with the instrumentalists and singers on stage facing the congregation; the musicians and other worship leaders being young men and women of remarkably good looks; almost no one over thirty (including the Y&RP researchers, who were themselves twenty-something students and whose judgment of leaders' looks the project directors relied on). Centerpoint stood out for the elaborateness and excellence of its production values--the musicians included a talented saxophonist, the overhead screen projected his and others' faces as well as the words of songs they were performing, the worship and message segments of the service flowed seamlessly and with per-

fect timing one from the other--and the time and thought that must have gone into planning the event, so thoroughly the theme of the day pervaded every aspect of the service.

Centerpoint's parent church is obviously rich in resources. The congregation was also one of the more affluent and white of those we canvassed, but we saw a similar pattern among Asian and Hispanic young people as well as less affluent, urban white folk, the young people off by themselves usually somewhere other than the sanctuary. But after more than a month of looking, we hadn't seen the same pattern among African Americans.

Finally, the research team assigned to canvass black churches announced to our workshop one Thursday that there would be youth ministry the next night in one of the Southside churches they had been visiting; we'll call it Skyway Church [another pseudonym]. Skyway is a non-denominational sanctified church, verging on mega- in size, serving a middle class African American clientele, where they have youth night every other Friday after evening prayer. So Rhys and I both went that Friday, accompanying the research team.

Some of what we saw that first night at Skyway and on a subsequent visit was what we'd been led to expect from the other youth ministries: an informal setting that didn't feel much like "church," but ended nonetheless with an invitation to discipleship; contemporary music with keyboards, guitars, and drums; witty and with-it references in the teachings; lots of young people, good looking men and women participating at all levels.

Yet the differences, well beyond the fact that Rhys Williams and I were the only whites in the place, swamped the similarities. The vocalists were grouped into choirs, not praise teams; the instrumentalists, all men, were not set up on a platform as performers but instead were accessible to other young men eager to learn from them and to volunteer their own services on the drums; some of the singers and instrumentalists were welcomed as representatives from sister churches; although the master of ceremonies seemed to be a teenager, those who brought the message were older, speaking with the wisdom of long experience in life and love as well as the resonance of a culture shared with the young people; above all, the congregation was both much older than than at Centerpoint and much younger. I was far from alone among those in late middle age, and little kids were all over the place. The 18 to 30 year olds were surrounded by people of all ages, from toddler to senior citizen.

After the service, Rhys and I spoke with an acquaintance of mine, a middle-aged woman, whose invitation to her church had been our first contact with Skyway. In response to our question, she indicated that she and other senior women were there that night both for their own edification and uplift and to support the youth of the church, whose talents were showcased and needs addressed in the service. Discussions back in our workshop with our African American student researchers suggested that worship may be most meaningful for youth in the black church when their elders are present. Further research and reflection led to a hypothesis that religion in the black church is inherently intergenerational.

With that in mind, we gave more thought to what we'd seen at Centerpoint. For all the excitement and excellence of their offerings, we wondered about the future of such a ministry and of its charges. With their stress on contemporary music (one of the songs the ensemble performed had a copyright date of 2000), would they try to keep up with the latest compositions, intending to minister to the same age group of twenty-somethings as new people come into and veterans graduate from the group? Or would they stay with the same generational cohort, those born roughly between 1970 and 1980, keeping the same treasured songs as the members moved through life? If they expect people to graduate and move on, where do they expect them to go? If Centerpoint is to age along with their Gen-Xers, what will happen to new generations of youth? (*)

These questions are made more compelling by the fact that Centerpoint's parent church, which meets in an auditorium down the wide corridor, was founded to minister to baby boomers, with whose religious needs and cultural sensibilities it has now traveled a quarter century. Maybe such a church has the resources to found a new congregation every twenty years or so. What about your church?

With these questions in mind, we went out to look at other modes by which religious institutions engage and are shaped by the energies and identities of young people.

More interesting was what this event might say about "young adult ministry" in the Black church. I understand that Team 1 has been somewhat frustrated in not finding young adult ministries, even after much searching. I also found the relative paucity of 18-30 year old youth at this event intriguing. It wasn't full, and the crowd wasn't particularly young. But it's

not that the place was empty. There were plenty of people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, there, particularly women. What about the possibility that there is no such thing as "young adult ministry" of the "Vineyard" or "River" style in the Black church? Maybe church is inherently intergenerational, where young people partake in part to demonstrate to their elders that, after all the sturm und drang, they honor their elders' wisdom. Maybe the elders are both so enamored of church and feel so strongly that church is where their voices must be heard by the young that they can't imagine abandoning the sanctuary to the kids, even on a Friday night. Some may be an audience for their own kids' performance but others, including two women next to me, attend as, according to our developing theory, elder witnesses to the church youth's good works.

Analysis: MofF is another "family ministry," even on. And Team A seems to agree that such a pattern is typical of the black church. In such a place "youth night" does not mean a night when the young people take over the church to do their own worship. "Youth night" in the black church may be church for and of youth, but it's not church by youth. Maybe they're not trusted to do that, as ES's talk about previously working without authority implies. Maybe worship wouldn't be as meaningful for the young people without their elders present. Instead, this youth event addresses the youth (in NN's sermon) and showcases them (as in the choir's performance); it doesn't belong to them. My impression (I need to spend more time reading reports) is that old teams 2 and 4 and new teams B, D, and E have seen more worship by youth.

Organ and piano not electronic keyboard; choir, not combo; performers not given space but surrounded with hangers-on, visiting choirs; a congregation of 120-150, all AfAm except for AM, RW and me, of all ages from pre-school to 70, rather few teens, and about 2/1 F (nowhere near as skewed as some black churches I have been in, with the gender ratio being more even in the "youth" age range than among the older folks). Message brought by a women of young middle age, her talk studded with rather conservative worldly advice: Study, pay attention to your pastor and your parents, and (especially to young women) stay away from temptation; don't think that you can get real love by having sex with a guy; when you find the right guy to marry, be ready to submit to him so that he will treat you like a lady.

* See Lauren Winner, "Worship By Generations," Christian Century, November 8, 2000, p. 1148.

© 2002 Youth and Religion Project