

Reaching Young Adults to Build New Ministries

Many people in their 20s are trying to figure out who they are and how their lives can make a difference. They're looking for meaningful work, enduring friendships, and clarity about core values and commitments.

Although some young people join Christian congregations to help them sort out these concerns, many pastors are concerned that too few 20-somethings are connecting with churches. Religious leaders want to reach young people but admit that they aren't sure what to do.

"These young people long to make a difference with their lives," says Kenda Creasy Dean, professor of youth, church and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. "They're envisioning something worthy of a lifetime commitment, but they don't always see churches as part of that vision. It's not that young adults believe churches are bad – many just don't see them as places that can help them make a difference in the world."



The seminary is launching one of 12 innovation hubs around the country that will be helping congregations connect with young adults in lasting, meaningful ways. Supported by \$19.4 million in grants through the Lilly Endowment's Young Adult Initiative, the five-year program will help congregations find new ways to engage adults, ages 23-29.

This isn't a new challenge for Christian communities. Each generation has needed to recognize the emerging passions of young people and reimagine how to engage them, listen to them and work with them to build ministries that support their religious lives.

Today is no different. Many congregational leaders see great possibility with this latest generation of young people. They want to belong, connect and contribute to the well-being



of the world. But they want to have significant involvement in how that happens within religious communities. Rather than be ministered to, they want to be part of shaping their experiences in the church. Pastors recognize that times have changed, yet their congregations are still tethered to old approaches to ministry that no longer work.

The innovation hubs are located in 10 states and Washington, D.C., and include a broad spectrum of Christian traditions: mainline Protestant, evangelical, African-American, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and independent congregations.

Churches that want to engage young adults in ministry must build those ministries with them, says Reuben Davis (opposite), a veteran young adult minister and children's minister at New Era Church in Indianapolis where Erin Austin (right) is a young adult member. Above, an intentional Christian community of people in their 20s is part of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary's work with young adults.

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Each hub will work with 12 to 24 congregations, and the participating churches may request grants of up to \$30,000 to help them design, launch and evaluate these new ministries. And innovation hub leaders will bring together congregational leaders to share what they are learning and support one another.

A big part of the effort will focus on helping congregations understand that they must listen to the desires and hopes of young adults today and identify barriers to young people's participation in congregational life. These range from cumbersome committee structures and membership requirements to lackluster worship and mission programs that discourage young people from taking active roles in shaping and leading congregational ministries.

The Young Adult Initiative builds on the findings from two



Through this grantmaking the Endowment has learned that young adults in their 20s:

- Long for spaces to explore questions of identity and purpose
- Seek to tap into theological traditions as they make life-defining choices about work, friendship, family and service to others
- Value relationships with peers and mentors as they seek religious nourishment and support for understanding their religious identities
- Desire self-sufficiency and religious experiences that reflect personal convictions and diverse cultural, political, social and theological perspectives
- Are part of a “do-it-yourself” culture and seek significant involvement in shaping ministries that nourish their religious lives
- Yearn to be part of communities that gather beyond the perceived boundaries of a local church



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decades of Endowment-supported programs and research projects. Among them is the National Study of Youth and Religion. Launched in 2000 with an initial Endowment grant to the University of North Carolina and supported by four additional grants to the University of Notre Dame, the study included waves of research that has documented the religious beliefs, attitudes and spiritual practices of young people as they have grown from teenagers into young adulthood. Also, the Endowment has made grants to more than 300 colleges and universities, campus ministries and theological schools across the country to help high school youth, college students and young adults discover how God is calling them to fulfilling lives of service, community involvement and work, including careers in ministry. These efforts are sustained through ongoing programs supported by the Endowment and operated by the Council of Independent Colleges’ Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education and the work of the Atlanta-based Forum for Theological Education.

Research about the religious lives of young adults reveals that many people in their 20s want to be part of communities that gather beyond the walls of a local church (above). At New Era Church in Indianapolis (left and opposite), ministry with children and young adults begins with learning about the lives of young people today.



As part of the initiative, an Endowment grant to the Indianapolis Center for Congregations will enable the center to enhance the work of innovation hubs by bringing together project directors for mutual support and learning. The Rev. Timothy Shapiro, the center's president, says congregation leaders are longing for ways to engage young adults, but they need access to research and new ideas to do so. They need encouragement and support, as well.

"Through our work with congregation leaders we know that they want their congregations to be communities where young adults feel they can belong," Shapiro says. "With this initiative, congregations will grow as places for young adults to deepen their relationships with God. As pastors and others in ministry come alongside young adults, they may experience – perhaps for the first time – what it looks like to build enduring relationships with members of the millennial generation."



The Young Adult Initiative

