

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.theparishpaper.com

February 2007

Lyle E. Schaller

Where Do Teenagers Want to Go to Church?

A variety of surveys, congregational studies, and polls suggest that *close to one-half of all Americans born in the 1988-1993 era are not regular churchgoers.*

--Except for special events such as Christmas, Easter, a wedding, the baptism of a sibling, a funeral, or the celebration of a family anniversary, the youth in that 50 percent of teenagers rarely go to church on the typical weekend.

--Many of these youth perceive confirmation and/or graduation from elementary or middle school as their door to greater personal independence.

--Their expanded sense of freedom to roam beyond parental expectations is even more pronounced following graduation from high school.

A second group of teenagers, *slightly more than one-fourth of all American teenagers, regularly attend church with their parents.* Responding to that statistic, church leaders often ask, "How can we increase that percentage?"

One way to answer that question: *Look at the remaining one-fourth of teenagers.* Youth in this group, because they are either self-motivated or peer-influenced, attend the church *of their choice*, rather than their parents' choice.

--A fair number in this group worship with one or both parents in the congregation *of their parents' choice* nearly every weekend.

--However, in addition to that attendance, at least once and sometimes two or three times every week these youth also attend another church, *one that they themselves choose.*

Which Churches Do Teenagers Choose?

One observation is that the number of these congregations that attract substantial numbers of teenagers *who are NOT there because of kinship ties* is increasing. Some carry a denominational affiliation; others do not. Thanks to the fact that the number of licensed drivers in the United States now exceeds the number of licensed motor vehicles by a 235 million to 200 million ratio, the geographical proximity of that congregation's meeting place to the teenager's home is of minor importance.

Most of the congregations that are a destination of per-

sonal choice among teenagers display at least a dozen of the following fifteen characteristics:

1. Many of these youth describe their congregation of choice as "my second family." It is a community of peers.

2. Music is one of the most heavily used and effective channels of communication in these churches. A hundred years ago most Americans identified themselves by their ancestry and the language they spoke. For these teenagers, music is an important expression of self-identification.

3. One of the most influential cohesive forces in these congregations is the network of relationships among the youth. Frequently these teenagers find that their most valuable personal social connections are their peers in this group.

4. By virtue of its size, the very large public high school is able to offer choices not available to students in the small



secondary school. One of the price tags on that large range of choices is anonymity and complexity. One consequence: as the size of a school increases, more and more students are unable to create a personal social network with fellow students.

For some of these teenagers, participation in what is an avowedly Christian youth group provides the opportunity to create a closely knit fellowship circle of five to a dozen teenagers.

--This may be a Bible study and prayer group that meets on campus.

--It is more likely to be a youth group affiliated with one particular congregation. "All of my close personal friends come here" is a common explanation.

5. The teaching is Scripture-based. One of the goals of the adult leadership is to increase the number of teenagers who are fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. This becomes a contagious goal shared among the youth.

6. A related focus is helping these youth experience the joy of learning something new. In other words, the design is built around listening and learning, not simply teaching.

7. Overlapping that focus is the assumption that being a devoted Christ follower is NOT an automatically inherited Christian characteristic. It is a choice made by each individual!

8. One of the common tactics is to challenge and equip every teenager to be engaged in doing ministry. Experiential learning is a central component of the design.

9. Among the assumptions that drive the choice of adult leadership, either volunteer or paid, are (a) that adult is a passionate disciple of Jesus Christ and (b) that passion is contagious.

10. The importance of prayer, both by individuals in private and in the context of the group, is a central component of the design.

11. Expressions of the faith not only include Bible study and prayer but frequently include music, hand-clapping, dance, and movement.

12. Instead of following a producer-driven design created by a religious publishing house or a denominational agency, these congregations usually come up with a customized design driven by the needs of today's teenagers.

One of those customized designs is based on the assumption that these teenagers are scattered along a broad spectrum in terms of their personal faith journey:

--At one end of that spectrum are the curious inquirers brought by a close friend who is a believer.

--The next stage consists of new believers.

--The third stage includes self-identified believers (often "birthright Christians"), many of whom were reared in a Christian home. The common thread is that they are eager to learn more about the Christian faith.

--A fourth stage may include the largest number of teenagers. Most of these are "graduates" from the third stage. Their top priority is to integrate into their lives what is required of the fully devoted Christ follower.

--The fifth stage focuses on challenging and equipping disciples to be engaged in doing ministry, with a strong emphasis on experiential learning and structured reflection.

13. Many, but far from a majority of these congregations, schedule a weekly worship experience, often on Sunday evening, that may be described as "owned and operated *by* teenagers *for* teenagers."

--The two or three adults involved may make their most valuable contribution when, a couple of days later, they share in the evaluation of that worship service by watching the videotape or DVD that recorded it.

--The five-to-seven adults and youth watching it agree on "what needs to be done to make it better next time."

14. A modest proportion of these congregations constitute the local base for the ministries of a parachurch organization engaged in ministry with students at the local high school.

15. When asked to identify what they perceive to be the most distinctive characteristic of this ministry, they do NOT point to the magnetic personality of a youth pastor born in the 1965-1985 era. Instead, several of the youth will explain, "We're here because we want to be here, not because we want to please our parents or because we feel obligated to participate!"

So What?

Has the time come to redesign your congregation's ministry with today's teenagers?

If so, why not appoint a youth ministry team to visit two or three congregations in which most of those fifteen characteristics are part of their youth ministry model?

If so, why not interview two or three adult leaders in each of those youth-magnetic congregations and ask what they feel are the essential ingredients in their youth ministry effectiveness?

Summary: Why not study congregations with notably successful youth ministries?