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Young Christians and Sharing the Faith: Room for Improvement

This spring, I ventured out to gauge the current spiritual climate and activity of young adults in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I held round-table discussions with two young adult groups in atmospheres that were non-threatening and “chill” to foster real dialogue.

My point for gathering these groups was to encourage open dialogue that would lead to answers on what faith life looks like as lived out by Christian young adults day-to-day. I wanted to discover if they were witnessing and serving. And if not, why not?

What I found in common in the groups is that few direct faith conversations are happening between our Christian young adults and their peers. However, the *reason* for this lack of engagement differed based on the age of the groups.

The first group was comprised of *younger* young adults—those in their early twenties and fresh out of college. They were primed for open conversation noshing on a free meal of pizza and dessert while attending to their iPads.

Few spiritual points were raised by the group even though these are young Christians that gather regularly; in fact, the room was silent between questions. However, when the group was asked a question they were eager and open to answering it, and they kept asking for more questions. They seemed hungrier for spiritual dialogue as it pertains to their real life than for the pizza. However, they seemed ill equipped to generate such conversation on their own.

This group in their early twenties most identified with guarding their faith on a daily basis—that is, just trying to stay Christian—versus actively sharing Jesus with their peers. In fact, only two of the twenty said they verbally share their faith. The eighteen that identified with guarding versus sharing their faith said they had either not tried to share because of their fear of offending someone; or, in a couple cases, they had quit witnessing because someone seemed offended by the idea that only one path leads to heaven. Ultimately, they said that young adults are very sensitive and do anything they can to avoid offending someone. This group of twenty-somethings agreed that they could benefit from training on how to share their faith and what to say in a conversation.

The group of *older* young adults was comprised of those in their early- to mid-thirties, and primarily parents. This group was well equipped for conversation with their much-needed coffee drinks in hand and their organic vegetables and hummus beside them. A conversation about natural oils and organic produce arose, and it seemed this was the closest many of them had had to a night out in some time. One couple came with their baby and smashed peas in tow. This multitasking group passed the baby around without a word.

This group of thirty-somethings, although more relaxed—and less hungry—than the twenty-somethings, had more to say about our churches and their lives as Christians. They had tried witnessing and crashed and burned here and there. They primarily identified with exhaustion, and frustration with our churches.

Although this group identifies with enjoyment from sharing their faith, they only share their beliefs with those they have served or with whom they have been in a long-term friendship. Rather than through corporate outreach within a congregation, though, most of their witnessing takes place individually. In fact, many of those in their thirties felt burned out and overly analyzed when serving in leadership positions within our congregations; and so, they have backed out of serving.

This group did not seem as afraid of offending someone when talking of their faith; however, they themselves had felt offended by older people in their congregations. They felt overall that their parents, when at the same age or younger, had been viewed with more respect within the church and given more opportunities to serve as leaders. This group, however, did see ways for our church-body to grow. They said they would enjoy corporately reaching out to the community if they felt trusted and viewed as credible by the other members of their congregations. They also said that they would be more apt to serve within corporate outreach as part of their congregation if their pastor was standing beside them serving as well. They wanted to see the gap between senior leadership and lay leaders through service bridged.

This research has demonstrated that there is much room for improvement in terms of the confidence and capacity for faith-conversations between young adults. Yet, I was encouraged to find that gaps could be filled through simple evangelism training (and how to share Jesus in 2014) as well as by making opportunities available for Christians of all ages and stages to serve together.

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