



AN INTRIGUING OUTREACH POSSIBILITY

A bishop of an annual conference with known liberal leanings recently commented that he believed that many of the younger evangelicals who are dropping out of evangelical churches could find a welcome home in The United Methodist Church. The premise is that young adults are leaving evangelical churches in large part due to concerns over judgmental attitudes, restrictive sexual ethics, and association with right-wing politics, among other things. Many UMCs do not view these issues in the same light as the churches these folks left, so there seems to be an opportunity here for these churches to reach out to these young adults. While certainly intriguing, this raises many questions. Assuming that these young people are still interested in church, will they be interested in joining a church that is also liberal theologically? Are there means by which a liberal church can connect on sufficient levels with these young adults, who may still hold a high value on biblical authority and some other evangelical basics? Are United Methodist churches with evangelical characteristics a viable option for these young people? All this is complex, but bears consideration.

One helpful tool is the book *You Lost Me*, written by a young evangelical researcher. He conducted a significant survey across denominational lines and found that most young defectors, regardless of denomination, had some common characteristics. He describes three different groups that leave: 1) Nomads—They walk away from church engagement but still consider themselves Christians; 2) Prodigals—They lose their faith, describing themselves as “no longer Christian”; and 3) Exiles—They are still invested in their Christian faith, but feel stuck (or lost) between culture and the church.

The Nomads are most likely to be reached since they are mostly just adrift. Prodigals are goners. Exiles can be reached but are more challenging. Hence, an initial obstacle faced with the outreach is that the population most likely to be reached is becoming a smaller subset of the larger category first suggested.

For United Methodists to reach disaffected evangelicals, several issues are critical. First, we must address our own losses. While hard data is not handy, it would be surprising if UMC defections are any less severe among the post-high school age group. If we can't figure out how to keep our own, crossing cultural barriers to reach others will be even more difficult.

Second, we must realize that evangelicalism is not monolithic and is in fact quite diverse. This includes Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Seventh Day Adventists, non-denominationalists, and even mainline churches with evangelical pastors and congregations. While young adults leaving these churches have things in common, they also have some distinctions in what turned them off and what they still value. The evangelical subcultural diversity adds layers of complications to those UMC churches seeking to understand who it is they wish to reach.

Third, we can't fake the kind of spirituality the evangelicals usually identify with. If they are seeking this, they won't likely find it in most liberal churches, no matter how otherwise welcoming the church is. If the evangelical defector never really owned evangelical spirituality or now does not value it, however, obviously that is a different story.

One model of churches reaching the younger evangelicals who have left the nest is the emergent church. In fact, many of the leaders in this movement

are just these very people. Emergent church works for some of these younger adults, but not all. There is much diversity among emergent churches, of course, so their attractiveness varies depending on how well they match the specificity of those they hope to attract. Some emergent leaders, such as Tony Jones, have rejected much more of their past than they have kept. Also, emergent was the darling a few years ago, but does not seem to command the attention it used to any more. It is not clear that this form of church is the force some of the main proponents have claimed. Furthermore, existing churches can't just add an emergent-style service and hope to attract the audience being discussed. Those who trend toward emergent churches are looking for the entire ministry to be emergent, not just a service.

One excellent example of a United Methodist ministry that may fit the bill is evidenced by the pioneering work of Elaine Heath. Rev. Dr. Heath teaches evangelism at Perkins and has developed some house-church style groups called New Day Communities. These have real traction with seminary students, and even immigrant groups. These communities are connected to regular UMC congregations called anchor churches. There is a high value placed on intentional faith cultivation, yet without a lot of baggage from traditional church. Not surprisingly, these strongly resemble the early Methodist groups during the tenure of the Wesleys.

For liberal or moderate churches to really reach disaffected young evangelicals, they will either need to find the situation where the person has rejected everything other than what the liberal churches offer, or they will need to somehow bridge the gap of remaining evangelical distinctives. While these will obviously differ from person to person, if the young person still values remnants of evangelical theology and culture, the church will need to genuinely express

value for these too. This does not mean they become evangelical, but they must at least show respect and encourage those who are. It would be helpful if they also understood evangelicals and could have informed conversation, without being judgmental. Such judgment, after all, is a contributing factor motivating many young evangelicals to defect from the churches of their origin. While many corners of the UMC place a high value on cultural competency around racial/ethnic and social issues, it is not so obvious that this same emphasis extends to theological differences. This would have to change.

Reaching a particular demographic is at the heart of the mission of the church. Each local church should be asking the basic question, "Who is God calling us to reach?" In demographically homogeneous communities, this becomes the general outreach to all. In highly diverse communities, most churches need to focus on particular groups, since reaching all is much more difficult. For some churches near significant populations of young disaffected evangelicals, this may be a group God is calling them to reach. May they be successful in doing so, in spite of the challenges!

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