

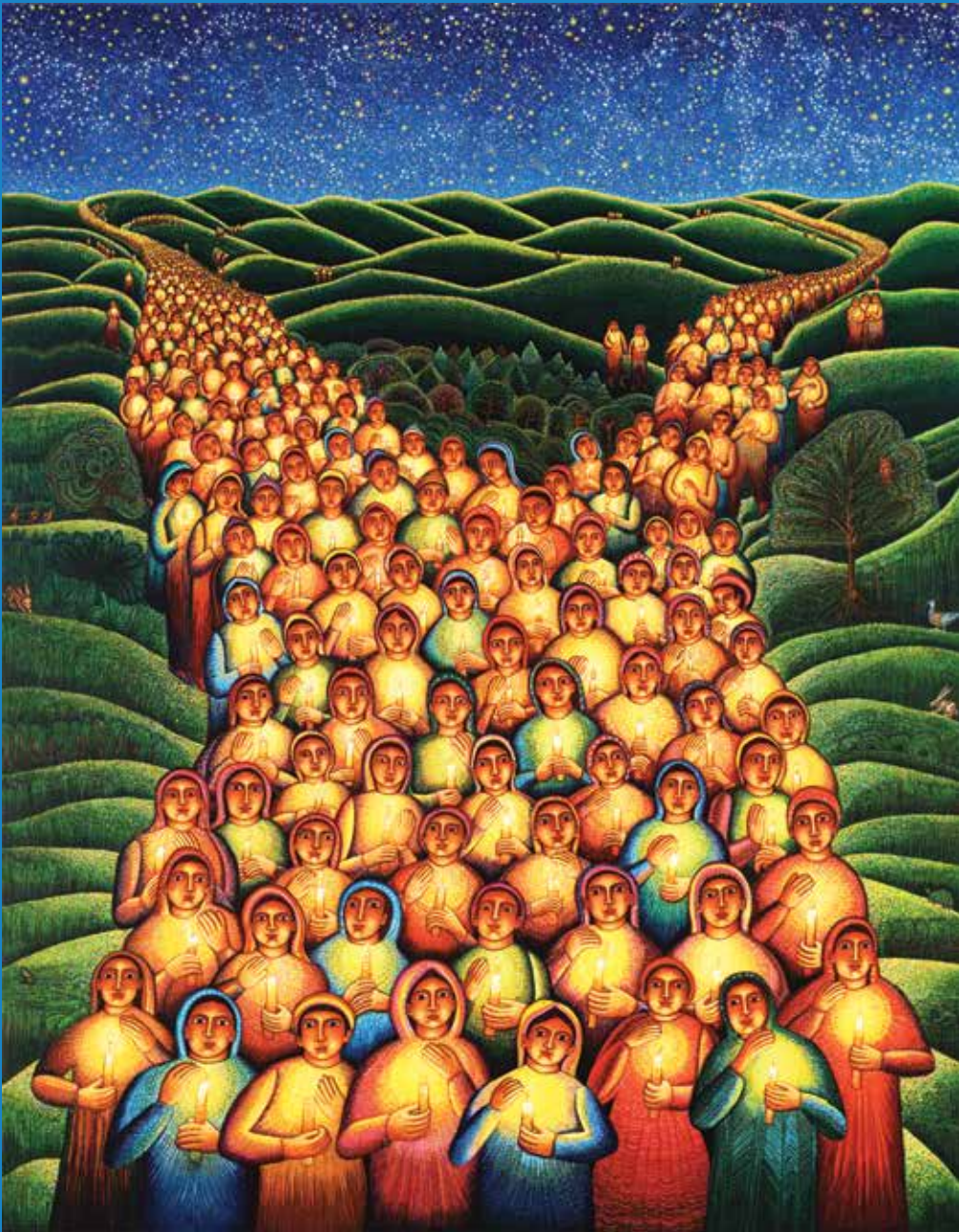
Spring 2014

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

Seeking the Light: A New Generation



Young people want to experience God in a real way. They're not looking for perfection from the church but transparency and honesty – "Don't lie to me. Tell me the truth."

– J. Lawrence Turner '06 M.Div.

COVER ART — *Festival of Lights*

California native John August Swanson is a celebrated painter who works in oil, watercolor, acrylic, and mixed media. He is also an independent print-maker of limited edition serigraphs, lithographs, and etchings.

His art reflects a heritage of storytelling he inherited from his Mexican mother and Swedish father. His themes speak to humane values, cultural roots, spiritual transformation, and self-discovery.

Influences on his style include the imagery of Islamic and medieval miniatures, Russian iconography, the color of Latin American folk art, and the tradition of Mexican muralists.

For more, see www.johnaugustswanson.com.

His work was featured at a Yale Institute of Sacred Music exhibit in 2008.

Regarding the making of *Festival of Lights*, Swanson has written: "I thought about liturgical processions I had seen. I remembered walking with groups in candlelight for peace in Central America. The symbol of candles shining in the dark night is powerful to me. Star-filled nights are images that help give me a sense of the place we are in the universe.

"My original thought was that this would be a procession of children from every city and town. The children would bring light and peace to the world. They would gather from many places, joining an unending procession towards peace and nonviolence for all the children of the world."

He cites a quote from George Bernard Shaw: "Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY

Jonny Baker is a London-based photographer, worship leader, independent record producer, blogger, and author who is active in the alternative worship scene in the U.K.

"I am passionate about faith and spirituality, and my life's quest seems to be caught up with exploring how the Christian faith can creatively grow in the soil of contemporary cultures," he writes at jonnybaker.blogs.com.

"To that end I blog about alternative worship, emerging church, missions, and spirituality."

Baker writes extensively on belief, prayer, the arts, and spiritual creativity in postmodern times. He is the author of *Curating Worship* (SPCK, 2010) and other books.

His photography can be seen at flickr.com. He is a member of the London Independent Photography organization, and his work has been featured in exhibitions and various publications.

His golden rule, he says, is to take a camera with him at all times.

REFLECTIONS — VOLUME 101, NUMBER 1

ISSN 0362-0611

Reflections is a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry published twice a year by Yale Divinity School. Opinions expressed are solely those of the contributing authors and do not represent those of the sponsoring institution and its administration and faculty.

We welcome letters to the editor. All correspondence regarding Reflections should be addressed to editor Ray Waddle at the Divinity School's address or at ray.waddle@yale.edu.

For a free subscription or to order additional copies of the current issue or past issues, please go to reflections.yale.edu or call 203-432-5359.

The website also features options for making a financial gift to the Divinity School as a way to support the work of Reflections. The magazine is a public service of the School's mission to promote faith and intellect in contemporary society.

Gregory E. Sterling — Publisher

Ray Waddle — Editor-in-Chief

Constance Royster — Senior Advisor

Peter Johnson, YPPS — Graphic Designer

Campbell Harmon — Online Coordinator

Seeking the Light: A New Generation



From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling
The Reverend Henry L. Slack
Dean of Yale Divinity School
& Lillian Claus Professor
of New Testament

We are witnessing at least two major changes in the demographics of Christianity. The first is the global shift of Christianity from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere. In 1910, 82 percent of the world's Christians lived in the northern hemisphere; in 2010, that percentage had fallen to 39 percent. The most telling shift has taken place in Europe and in Africa. In 1910, 66 percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe; in 2010, only 26 percent. In 1910, only 1 percent of the world's Christians lived in Sub-Saharan Africa; in 2010, this had increased to 24 percent.

What has happened in Europe? Two world wars and a series of other circumstances have led to large-scale secularization in Europe. The secularization can take different forms – from the widespread atheism in former East Germany to strict religious neutrality, from militant secularism to tolerance for all. Secularization has resulted in the marginalization of Christianity and the disappearance of the symbols that have linked Christianity to Europe: Old churches are being converted into secular structures at a rapid rate in some countries, e.g., the Netherlands.

The second story is the rise of the “nones” in the U.S. According to a now famous 2012 poll released by the Pew Research Center, one in five adult Americans does not have a tie to a religious tradition. Among those between ages 18 and 29, it is one in three.

Are we following the footsteps of our older European friends? The evidence suggests that there is a difference. The “nones” in the U.S. are not necessarily secular: One of the monikers of the movement is that they are “spiritual but not religious.” Many believe in God and value spirituality but have developed an allergic reaction to institutional forms of religion.

This is one of the – if not the – most pressing challenges confronting Christians in the northern hemisphere at the outset of the 21st century. How can we become relevant? How can we develop a voice that speaks the Good News to people in the 21st century that is both faithful to the first-century gospel and yet rings true in modern ears? How can we articulate anew a message that once leaped across the boundaries of an ancient world that was limited in size but required enormous effort to traverse, to a vast contemporary world that is reduced in size exponentially by modern communication and transportation?

This issue of *Reflections* explores our world of spiritual turbulence and change. The voices of writers found in these pages range from those who are “nones” to those who want to understand them and find fresh ways to speak to them and to others in this new climate. Reading these reports and arguments, you will quickly realize that the causes of the rise of the “nones” and the most effective ways to relate to them are not simple or obvious.

Do I worry about the increase in those who find churches irrelevant? Yes. Am I disheartened by it? No. The nones have said that they do not find what we are offering compelling. We must rethink what we are saying and doing. I find this challenging and, in a way, exhilarating. I am not disheartened because I realize that there are many talented and dedicated people thinking about this, as this Spring 2014 *Reflections* reveals. More importantly, I am not disheartened because, ultimately, I believe God will work among us.

Gregory E. Sterling
Dean

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A Dispatch from the Front Lines

By Ian Oliver

I'm thinking of a scene in the 2009 film Agora – loosely based on struggles between Jews, Christians, and pagans in fourth-century Alexandria. It's an awful and inaccurate film in many ways, but I'm a Patristics nerd, and we just don't get very many big-budget movies about Late Antiquity.

In the scene I'm thinking of, the high priest of Serapis and his lieutenant look down from the tower of the Serapeum as a gigantic crowd of Christians swarms the temple, and the lieutenant to the high priest says: "Since when were there so many Christians?"

On those relatively rare days when I feel a little low, working at Christian ministry at Yale, I imagine myself like that priest of the passing order, looking down from the tower of Battell Chapel, wondering: "Since when were there so many non-Christians?"

Dispensations Old and New

Don't get me wrong. I'm sure I would've hated the old dispensation at Yale – a campus defined by white Protestant American male heterosexual privilege if ever there was one. Most of my friends and I wouldn't have even been allowed through the gates. But on those days when I'm feeling a little

We Christians no longer own America, and no longer have to twist our faith to accommodate its contradictions.

whiney, a little put-upon (don't we all feel a little bit that way, on occasion?), I can't help but imagine a past gilded age of Christian unanimity when Christians didn't have to explain themselves.

We're in a different world today, though.

In 2012, before the fall semester began, I was asked to convene a group of incoming Yale Divinity students who didn't fit – the "others" and the "nones." As I told that group, I have watched demographic changes over the years, and they are not the outsiders. They are the future.

I believe I was invited to preach here in Marquand Chapel today because there is interest in a perspective on our religious future from a Christian working every day on Yale's often very secular campus. In 25 years of chaplaincy, I've watched the number of cradle-Christians at my schools – those with two parents of one denomination and raised in that denomination – dwindle from hundreds, to a hundred, to a large handful.

Some people want to attribute this change to bad preaching, and, I must say, if that's the case I'm probably personally responsible for a good part of the decline.

But those who look at the actual numbers say that the change was a perfectly predictable result of the creation of the world our founding mothers and fathers dreamed of – a post-traditional world where a Baptist could marry a Mormon, and a Jew could marry a Buddhist.

Add to this our constant mobility, and you get a lot of 18-year-olds with very mixed religions.

That Ship has Sailed

My many lifelong Presbyterian or Episcopalian students from days of old have been replaced by hundreds of sort of Episco-Presby-Pente-gationalists and hundreds of others who may have only grazed a religion or two along the way. Many others have been raised without any experience or knowledge of religion at all. I can spend all the time I like yearning for crowds of earnest Protestant youth, but that ship has sailed.

As I visit colleges from Georgia to Texas to Virginia, I see all the old labels breaking down. No matter what church leaders believe, Christian stu-

dents are happily crossing the boundaries between evangelical, Catholic, black Baptist, and mainline without a care in the world. Though I was initially stern about this religious frivolity, I started to ask myself: “Well, who said you can’t do that?”

Looking down from my tower of nostalgia, I confess I am distracted by faces I recognize in the crowd of those who are blissfully mixing their religions. There’s that amazing gay student raised a Jehovah’s Witness who is wrestling with a Jesus

What if the buildings, denominations, and beloved old ways of doing things were more about American culture of a particular time than about the gospel?

he loves but a Jesus who is still implicated in the estrangement he feels from his family. There’s the evangelical student who was transfixed by a service trip to Central America but whose father now accuses him of being a Communist. There’s another – Catholic by background, captivated by Young Life in high school, and now converting to Judaism because of a relationship.

They don’t fit my old categories. Each one is almost an ethnography in him- or herself. They are creating their own identities in ways that sometimes worry me, but the freedom and joy in their journeys are unmistakable.

“I Make All Things New”

The old labels were comfortable – they sorted the world into manageable chunks. I do still have those grumpy days when I want to say: “You can’t just read about, say, the Mennonites, in a book and decide to be one.” There’s a whole culture there to be imbibed at the breast, an honored history, and at least several hundred hymns to be memorized.

But the one on the throne sings: “Behold, I make all things new.”

Charles Taylor has written in his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, that sometime in the last couple of hundred years, we in the West crossed a line between a world in which it was presumed that you would be religious and a world in which it is presumed that you will not be.

Whatever the causes, and most of them were not theological, the exit door opened for folks who were never really sure why they were in church in the first place.

Whether it was the excesses of Christians in politics, the clergy sexual abuse crisis, or the alternative weekend option of youth soccer leagues, many

people no longer feel it’s expected of them to go to church. Even some of my most devoted evangelical students have come back to tell me: “I just can’t go to church any more.”

For those of us from the old mainline Protestant establishment in America, this means that we are no longer in charge.

Sorry.

But I’m here today to say: We haven’t run out of wine, we’ve just run out of old wineskins to try to pour it in.

The good news is that the burden of trying to somehow square American culture with Christian faith has been lifted from our shoulders. We Christians no longer own America, and no longer have to twist our faith to accommodate its contradictions.

The good news is that there are lots – lots and lots – of people who respond with joy and relief to the Good News of the gospel. People who feel lost in an amoral society whose only true gods are money and entertainment.

The good news is – and this will get me in trouble, I know – there are lots of people who want to

My many lifelong Presbyterian or Episcopalian students from days of old have been replaced by hundreds of sort of Episco-Presby-Pente-gationalists.

be Christian, but not so many for whom the fine points of Calvinism vs. Arminianism seem to matter.

In my long-ago ordination exam, a beloved elder said to me: “Assume I know nothing about Christianity or Judaism, and then tell me in five minutes in language I can understand why you are a Christian.”

That’s a magnificent question I’m still working on.

God’s Grace Is Enough

In Acts 20:22-32, St. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, stopping at his churches along the route, sharing his uncertainties. He doesn’t know what will happen in Jerusalem, but he’s pretty sure it won’t go well. To the elders of the church in Ephesus, he says: *I’m not sure what’s coming. But if my reception along the way is any indication – it’s probably accusations and trials and possibly prison. All I want to do is testify to the good news of God’s grace. If I can fulfill my ministry – none of the rest matters. Keep watch over the church, which the Holy Spirit put you in charge of. Shepherd the church, which was created in Christ’s blood. Yes, bad things will happen. You will be attacked. People in your own church will divide you. So, I commend you to God, and to the message of God’s grace, which will see you through.*

Today, Christians are not persecuted in America. Losing our majority position in the culture is not persecution. We are leaving a world where our voice was the only one, and entering a world where our voice is but one among many.

But we do well to listen to Paul's injunctions to the elders of Ephesus: *We don't know what will happen. We will certainly be misunderstood and misrepresented. But the message of God's grace is enough.*

There are those who will divide the church, who will point to this or that historical accretion and urge us to purify the gospel and so regain our lost place of privilege.

But people aren't leaving the church because it's not authentically Christian enough. They're leaving because Christians have finally convinced them by our behavior that Christianity is irrelevant to their struggles.

The old wineskins are dear to us. We shouldn't let go of them too easily. But what if the buildings, denominations, and beloved old ways of doing things were more about American culture of a particular time than they were about the gospel? As any pastor knows who has spent years in a parish, when you leave you have to let go of programs you gave your life to and trust that the Spirit will sustain what is right and good, and the rest will become blessed memories.

The Right Side of History

Voices will certainly rise that will urge us to adapt anew to the American culture of a new time – but that's just making the same mistake all over again. A new, trendier, entrepreneurial version of worshipping Serapis is still on the wrong side of history. The gospel of Jesus Christ stands over against popular culture, always challenging the forms we construct to make Jesus fit our cultural assumptions. We must meet Jesus the stranger again, whose message of liberation is always outside our methods and plans.

In the movie *Agora* again, there is a scene where Davus, a slave, meets a Christian and asks him how he performed a miracle. The man takes him into the church and says: I will show you a miracle. He digs into the slave's bag and finds loaves of bread. He puts the bread in the slave's hands and says: Give it to them – pointing to the crowds of poor people in the church. The slave resists, saying: It is my master's bread.

But the Christian presses him: Look at their faces, give it to them.

Slowly at first, but with increasing fervor, Davus presses the bread into the hands of the poor, who bless him and thank him in return. This is the

miracle – a slave feeding the poor. We will not regain this Christianity, as Rachel Held Evans has written, by hiring a youth pastor who wears skinny jeans or by creating a church Instagram account.

"Since when are there so many Christians?" Since Christ said to the slaves and the poor – you are God's beloved. Since the church put bread into the hands of slaves to give to the starving. By the conduct of our lives, by the depth of our communities, by our willingness to name the slaveries and delusions under which we and our neighbors suffer, by hard work and hard thinking – by these alone will we convince others that Christ still speaks and God still frees slaves.

Ian Oliver is Pastor of the University Church and Senior Associate Chaplain for Protestant Life at Yale University, where he is also advisor to the Disciples/UCC student group and a section facilitator for the introductory preaching course at YDS. He has also been chaplain at Bucknell University and Kodaikanal International School in India. This article is adapted from a sermon he gave at Marquand Chapel at YDS in October 2013. In a new book, College and University Chaplaincy in the 21st Century (Skylight Paths, 2013), edited by Lucy Forster-Smith, he contributed an essay called "In Coffin's Pulpit: Re-envisioning Protestant Religious Culture."

MERCURY GOD

By Ron Turner

God
eludes
us
like
mercury
chased
by
children's
fingers.

So
into
little
bottles
is
put.



Bracing for Change, With Faith

By Gregory E. Sterling

When I interviewed in 2012 for the deanship of Yale Divinity School, Linda Lorimer, Secretary of the Yale Corporation at the time, asked me what most excited me about the possibility and what most concerned me.

The answer, I responded, was one and the same: Yale Divinity School has, in my estimation, been the leading school for mainline Protestant churches in the U.S.; I wanted to see it re-emerge as a leading force in the renewal of Christianity. This is what excited me. What worried me was that there was a great deal that I could not control: I could exercise some influence within the school but not on churches.

A couple of months after I was appointed dean, I sat bolt upright in bed one night around 2 a.m. with the realization that what was easy to say in an interview had now become a pressing challenge.

Troubling Math

I have spent a great deal of time in the first year and a half of my deanship talking with people about the current state of Christianity. The numbers are troubling. There has been a long-term decline in mainline Protestant churches. As Robert Putnam and David Campbell pointed out in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster, 2010), from 1973-2008 a little more than half of the people who had grown up in mainline Protestant traditions left. Roman Catholics lost even more: 60 percent of whites who have grown up as Catholics in the U.S. have left their childhood faith. Approximately half of the mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics who left the church of their youth went to evangelical churches, a boon for the evangelical movement in the 1970s and 80s. However, in the last two decades evangelicals have also begun to experience losses. Ask yourself how many people from your generation with whom you grew up are still practicing Christians. The answer will be disconcerting.

Where are people going? Not to church. Since the 1960s sociologists have used the category “nones” to refer to those who do not have a religious

institutional allegiance. That trend has intensified dramatically, as the Pew Research Center and others have famously reported.

My wife and I routinely invite all first-year students at YDS to have dinner with us in our home. I have made it a practice to ask them why they believe their generation has found institutional forms of

Ask yourself how many people from your generation with whom you grew up are still practicing Christians. The answer will be disconcerting.

religion so problematic. Some answers are repeatedly offered. Many feel that Christianity has become too judgmental and formulaic. Alternatively, some think that we have lost our voice. In an effort to avoid being judgmental, we have failed to announce the Good News with conviction.

Or, we have made major mistakes that have undermined the church’s moral authority. We have been better sinners than saints.

Or, the world has become flat: Globalization has relativized faith.

Finally, many now turn to social media for networks rather than to established communities in both the political and religious realms.

These seismic shifts directly concern YDS in multiple ways. To begin with the obvious: Will our students have jobs? There are approximately 300,000 congregations in the U.S. However, if present trends continue, there will be significantly fewer in the future. Many churches are financially fragile. One major denomination reports 60 percent of its congregations are not financially viable. Bishops face tough decisions: Do they close failing congre-

gations in an effort to strengthen others, or will the closures simply reduce the local Christian witness and lead to an increase of nones?

These realia mean that students preparing for the ministry must now think about a bi-vocational career. The loss of churches may be a factor in the steady erosion of applications to divinity schools or seminaries nationally: The numbers have fallen by 2 percent per annum in recent years.

Traditionally, denominations have supported the schools that train their clergy. However, the loss of members has resulted in a loss of revenue and a corresponding loss of support to seminaries.

An Entrepreneurial Future

All of these factors have led many to speak of a post-denominational world. While it may be premature to speak in these terms, what is certain is that Christianity will not be the same in the future. The most important thing that we can do at YDS is to prepare responsible and creative ministers and priests for the future. In my opening remarks to the students last fall I said: “Christianity is changing and changing rapidly. I do not know what it will look like in 30 years, but you will write its history. We want to train you to be responsible and entrepreneurial leaders.”

What are we doing to help prepare students for this? At YDS we continue to provide rigorous training in the classical theological disciplines and emphasize social justice and love of neighbor. Students will need to be the intellectual leaders of their communities – perhaps more so in the future as denominational structures weaken or students build communities outside of those structures. There is no substitute for well-honed minds that can lead.

We remain committed to making Christianity relevant to social issues. We will also experiment on a number of fronts. We will offer one-hour courses on leadership that provide case studies of proven

Christianity may be recreated in new and surprising ways, but it will not disappear.

success. We will bring individuals from a wide range of fields – the corporate world, legal careers, not-for-profit institutions, pastorates, political fields – to campus for weekend courses. They will reflect on challenges they have met. Students need models of success in their field.

We will use our summer sessions to concentrate on the renewal of churches, with courses that feature successful case studies, new liturgies, or specialized ministries.

We will emphasize youth in a way that we have not in the past. One reason why mainlines lost so many younger people is that too little emphasis was placed on youth.

We will continue to expand the diversity of our students, both from underrepresented groups in the U.S. and students from abroad. We cannot think of Christianity monolithically or regionally. As dean I have a dream to place potentially every M.Div. student in a second internship – an internship that is international. Why? It would change the way that students think about Christianity.

Similarly, we will expand our courses in other religions. Christians comprise 32 percent of the world’s population, Muslims 22 percent, Hindus 15 percent, Buddhists 7 percent. We need to prepare students to address interfaith marriages and engage in interfaith dialogues. Not only will denominational lines become more blurred; so will religious lines.

Everlasting Church

How did I go back to sleep when I awoke so abruptly that spring night in 2012? I came to the realization that we do not have to do this alone. In *Everlasting Man*, published in 1925, G. K. Chesterton reminded us that Christianity has been on the verge of disappearance several times. “It is so true,” he wrote, “that three or four times at least in the history of Christendom the whole soul seemed to have gone out of Christianity; and almost every man in his heart expected its end.” But it did not disappear. “When Christianity rose again suddenly and threw them, it was almost as unexpected as Christ rising from the dead.”

Christianity is changing. Yet it is not in danger of disappearing. It may be recreated in new and surprising ways, but it will not disappear. We should remember the words of the Hebrew prophet who in Babylonian exile – where many thought Israel would disappear – said:

*For just as the rain and the snow come down
from heaven,
and will not return there until they have
drenched the earth,
causing it to bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so will be my word that goes out from my
mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
until it has accomplished that which I intended,
and has succeeded in that for which I sent it.
(Isa 55:10-11)*

Gregory E. Sterling is The Reverend Henry L. Slack Dean of Yale Divinity School & Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament.

LETTER POSTED ON THE SEA OF FAITH

By Jessica Anschutz



Dearest church,

I'm writing to you today from the inside, as one who has answered God's call to serve as an ordained clergyperson in a mainline Protestant denomination, or what many now call a sinking ship.

Do I ever think about doing something else? Of course I do. The grass is always greener on the other side, isn't it? Yet honestly as soon as I begin to consider greener pastures, something deep within compels me to stay – the eyes of an infant as she's baptized and claimed as a child of God, the widower as he mourns for the love of his life, the single mother struggling to make ends meet, the teenager willing to admit he has more questions about faith in God than answers, the parents of a son who has just "come out" and they're struggling to understand the harm their beloved child has experienced at the hands of a professed Christian.

In these moments, I can't help but feel that I am right where God has called me to be.

Not that it isn't frustrating or challenging or hard at times. But it is also a sacred honor to be invited to journey with people in the midst of the ordinary and extraordinary moments of their lives and to witness God working amid the joy, brokenness, and pain.

Nevertheless, the worrisome statistics and the conventional metaphor don't go away: Denominationalism appears to be a sinking ship.

It is harder to identify what will work to reverse the forces pulling this ship down than to say what will not work.

What will not work is complacency, an inward focus only on those who are already within our crumbling walls (the result, of course, of deferred maintenance).

What won't work is a belief that we can keep doing something because "we have always done it this way." There's no magic pill that will instantly fix all of our problems.

But there are some things statistics cannot predict and narratives of decline overlook.

I can say that I have witnessed God working to transform churches and the lives of people connected to them. I have seen young people come alive as they live their faith through service to their neighbors. I have seen transformations of people who come to a deeper understanding of God's presence as they share the bread and the cup at the Lord's table. I have felt the Spirit moving among people who engage in worship in a new way, people who

thought they had no song to sing. I have witnessed struggling, self-absorbed congregations begin to turn outward and move beyond the walls that once isolated them.

In the United Methodist Church, it has been said lately that our future depends on our response to a church-wide "Call to Action." Initiatives are underway to promote congregational vitality by empowering lay leaders, inspiring clergy excellence and worship, and focusing on small groups for children, youth, and adults. Yes, the church needs to change in many ways, and change can come by concentrating on these areas.

However, in the uncertainty of this post-denominational time, we cannot forget who brings us together in the first place. And it's not excellent programs or vital ministries. It is God, who loves us unconditionally, who extends grace to us without judgment and calls us to love others in return. If we lose sight of the one who calls us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly, then indeed our ship will sink.

So I stay.

I stay because I am compelled by the message of the one who sent his Son to die for us and who brought him back to life.

I stay because I am not afraid of this news of a ship in trouble. It may be that the ship as we've known it actually needs to sink – only then can it be re-imagined and renewed so we can focus again on that which brings light and life, the one who taught us to love.

I stay because I am called to share the love and break down the walls of division. I stay because I love liturgy and I love justice. I stay because I love being on this sacred journey with people who love God.

And I stay because I realize I am not alone: There are others like me, others who inspire me. Together we are guided by a loving God.

So, church, even through the pain and necessity of change, I am not prepared to leave you. Let's walk into God's future, together.

With love,
Jessica

Originally from Cabot, AR., the Rev. Jessica Anschutz '07 M.Div. is pastor of Central Valley United Methodist Church in Central Valley, NY., a member of the YDS alumni board, and the chair of class agents for YDS.



Holy Things for Holy People

By Emily M. D. Scott

A few years ago, I was out on a date with an avowed agnostic. He was in medical school and I was in the ordination process, and we met for drinks at a sidewalk cafe on the Upper West Side. Our conversation bounced from subject to subject, until at last we arrived at the conversation point I had perhaps been avoiding all along: the small, progressive church I'd founded called St. Lydia's.

"So it's a Dinner Church?" he asked me. "What does that mean?"

I explained that the worship at St. Lydia's was patterned after an early church practice of sharing a common meal. In the first few centuries of the Christian church, worship took place around the table.

"We sing a song," I told him, "and light candles on the table. Then I bless the bread, and we share it. Then we eat for a while, and when people are about done, we read a scripture passage, and talk about it, and share our stories. And then we hold hands and pray, and then read a poem, and then clean up together, and then sing a song and get a blessing and go home."

He was silent for a time. Then he said,

"That sounds ... really nice. It sounds like some of the evenings I spend with good friends. Really good friends. When the food is really good and the conversation is really good. Those nights feel sacred to me."

"Those nights are sacred," I told him. "Those nights with your friends are just as sacred as what I do in church on Sunday night."

A Postmodern Quest

The church of the 21st century is ridden with anxiety that we are dying. This fear seems to stem from an assumption that, as modern becomes postmodern, young people have no need for God. I think the changes we're seeing in the landscape of the church, however, have less to do with people's need for God, and more to do with their need (or lack of need) for

the church as they find it. People still crave connection to the holy and always will, I believe. The church too often simply fails to show up at the intersection of the holy and our lives.

The conversation with my date on the Upper West Side reassured me, as I've been reassured throughout my time in New York, that our craving for connection, our longing for the eternal, will never fade away. We will not evolve away from our desire for the divine. But we may not always seek God in the temple.

St. Lydia's was founded a little over four years ago in an effort to create a community of practice for the folks I was meeting in the city who felt this

People still crave connection to the holy and always will. The church too often simply fails to show up at the intersection of the holy and our lives.

hunger for connection with something they often didn't have a name for. The meal became our central practice of hospitality as we began to set a table each Sunday night for whoever showed up at our door. Four years in, we're an eclectic gathering of strangers and friends.

Last spring we launched a Monday Dinner service in addition to our Sunday service. Between the two, we're currently feeding more than 40 people each week. Now a Mission Development of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we plan

to add services on different weeknights as we grow, building a large, sustainable congregation without letting go of the intimacy so coveted by residents of an anonymous city. Various lay-led endeavors have sprung up from the community: Bible Study and a Theology Circle, a community garden and a movie club.

Sunday Best

Throughout the four years I and others have spent getting St. Lydia's off the ground, I've made a careful study of the relationship between what we might term the sacred and the ordinary, especially as it plays out in our liturgy. Since I was a child growing up in the Episcopal Church, I've observed that mainline Protestant liturgies spend time and energy setting things apart. The church itself is set apart from other neighborhood buildings with a steeple

Around the table, there is lively conversation, sometimes disagreement or an awkward moment.

and an imposing set of doors. By virtue of entering the sanctuary, congregants are set apart from neighbors. We wear dress-up clothes and generally attempt to be kinder or more polite than we might be during the work week. We have a set-apart meal on a set-apart table: a fragment of a meal that is set apart from our other meals with a wafer, a silver chalice, a set of words. Is the conclusion we might reach not that Jesus, too, is set apart? That he comes to us only when we're in our dress-up clothes and on our best behavior?

My love of the tradition I grew up in runs deep. But I have also felt a craving, throughout my life, for an acknowledgment of God's presence in the ordinary, or even the profane places of my existence – the places that are not set apart with silver or lace, but instead feel raw and raggedy. Does God not find me there too? It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the Latin root for "profane," *profanus*, means "outside the temple."

At St. Lydia's, the transgression of the boundaries between the sacred and profane is an integrated part of our weekly liturgical practice. What does this look like?

We might begin first with the bread, a loaf that is hearty and warm, not set apart on a special table but laid out on a quite ordinary one. After the Eucharistic Prayer has been sung and the bread has been shared around the circle, we dip it in our soup or use it to mop up sauce. Christ shows up when

we break the bread, and in the sharing of it, but this meal feels like so many other ordinary meals we have shared. Around the table, there is lively conversation, sometimes disagreement or an awkward moment. Children run around and dismiss their vegetables, and some of us (mainly me) wish that we had remembered to ask for nuts on the side.

We wear our ordinary clothes for this meal, because we've just come from work or from a Sunday afternoon in the park. This is perhaps more important than it seems. If we're in our regular clothes, we don't feel that we need to dress up in front of God, like Victorian children being presented to a set of intimidating and distant parents at tea time.

Then there are the words that are spoken as a part of this meal. These are mostly stories. In my preaching, I tell a lot of stories drawn straight from my life. The stories are nothing groundbreaking – just little tidbits of wonderings or memories. After the sermon, the congregation is invited to "share a story that was sparked by the text." And one begins to get the sense that, not only does each person in the room have something to say, something to claim about the movement of God in their lives, but that God stubbornly refuses to be resolved. The stories shared don't have neat endings. Sometimes they're tinged with anger or anxiety or regret. The words aren't set apart but are drawn from the deep well of an ordinary, human moment.

Ordinary, But Not Casual

Our worship is rooted in the ordinary, but I would not call it casual. The liturgy at St. Lydia's extends from the everyday, but that does not mean there is nothing special or reverent about it. Like the meals that Christ shared with his disciples both before and after his death and resurrection, though the material of the meal is ordinary – just bread and

I have felt a craving, throughout my life, for an acknowledgment of God's presence in the ordinary, even in the profane places of my existence.

wine – those ordinary things manage to cradle God. This is the perplexing truth of transcendence: that God erupts through ordinary things, not in spite of their ordinariness but because of it.

Ours is a God who comes to us in perhaps the most worldly way imaginable: a teenage girl who finds herself pregnant and unmarried. Ours is a God who is born in blood and water and dies in blood and water too, who spits in mud to make a

blind man see, who eats and drinks with sinners and prostitutes, who touches the diseased. If we think we will find this God set apart and stowed away within the walls of the temple, we are wrong.

Wholly Holy

Every week at church I break the bread and say, “Holy things for holy people.” The phrase used to bother me a little bit, because it sounded so prissy. *Holy people*, as if we were better, more pure, more chaste, than everyone outside the temple. As if we were set apart. Recently I learned that “holy” is from the old English word *hālig*, which simply means “whole.” “Whole things for whole people.” Perhaps that changes everything. That the church might be less about setting certain things apart as holy, and more about marking what is rare, what is beautiful, what is lovely, as *whole*. My agnostic date might have used this word in describing his dinners with friends to me, “Those nights seem *whole* to me.”

Is it not the case that something that is whole can be both of heaven and of earth? That we need not divide the sacred and the profane with such rigor, as if fearing contamination from one to the other? Perhaps the profane — all that lies outside the temple — has something to teach those who live within its walls about where wholeness, where holiness lives. And perhaps if our liturgies contain a little more of the world, we might find the sacred, cradled within.

The Rev. Emily Scott '06 M.Div. trained as a liturgist and musician at Yale Divinity School and the Institute of Sacred Music. She was ordained as a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2012.

Before I knew that mind
could never marry the words
it loved, in which it lost itself,
in which it dressed itself,
in which it sang its most secret
tender and bitter hymns,
I also loved the thrill of thinking.
Since birth I've swum in the clear,
decisive muscles of its currents,
the places where the water seemed
to reconsider its course before continuing,
then the sudden onrush of falls.
I lived inside language, its many musics,
its rough, lichen-crusting stones,
its hemlocks bowed in snow.
Words were my altar and my school.
Wherever they took me, I went,
and they came to me, winged and bearing
the beautiful twigs and litter
of life's meaning, the songs of truth.

Then a question arose in me:
*What language does the mind
speak before thinking, before
thinking gives birth to words?*
I tried to write without embellishment,
to tell no lies while keeping death in mind.
To write what was still unthought-about.
Stripped to their thinnest selves,
words turn transparent, to windows
through which I sometimes glimpse
what's just beyond them.
There, a tiny flash — did you see it?
There it is again!

GOD STILL SPEAKS: An Interview with Geoffrey Black



The Rev. Geoffrey A. Black '72 M.A.R. is General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, a denomination of 1.1 million members in the U.S. in more than 5,100 congregations. The denomination is known for a commitment to fighting injustices, honoring intellect and faith together, and affirming an all-loving God. "We are a church where Jesus the healer meets Jesus the revolutionary," the UCC website declares.

Black was elected to the position in 2009 after serving as Conference Minister of the New York Conference for nine years. He has been a local church pastor, a chaplain at Brown University, and a lecturer at Union Theological Seminary.

Ecumenical commitment, concern for equal justice, African-American empowerment, and community improvement are important themes in Black's ministry.

REFLECTIONS: *How would you characterize organized religion's future in light of the trend of declining numbers?*

GEOFFREY BLACK: The statistics are real, and there are a lot of reasons for it. We're seeing demographic shifts. There are regions in our country where the economy has been shrinking and people have moved away. They aren't going to the church their parents or grandparents went to and may not have an interest in church at all. That's the reality.

But I remind people there are still young people in our midst, and we can certainly have meaningful interaction with them. There's reason for optimism. I'm a member of a small congregation with a small youth group, and they are an exciting bunch of kids. Let's remember, there are young people who attend church and there are young people who they know who don't attend. With a little creativity, a church can turn to its young people as evangelizers. A church might double the size of its youth group by sponsoring a mission trip that focuses on repairing houses or teaching little kids. That excites young people.

Even a church with no youth can support those that do – through the denomination's youth programs. The UCC holds a national youth event every four years – attendance tops 4,000.

Some people wring their hands, but there's always potential. We have to be strategic. And we can't assume we know what young people want. We need to listen to them tell us what is important.

REFLECTIONS: *What are churches doing well?*

BLACK: It's important that churches give young people responsibility. Consult with them about how the

church can utilize social media and share the Good News. Invite them, and they feel affirmed. At the congregation I attend, we have a Sunrise service at Easter which is completely led by the young people. They are pumped! They see it as something they can do for their church.

One of the most successful ways the UCC has engaged young people is in congregations which conduct our faith-based comprehensive sexuality curriculum called "Our Whole Lives." Children and youth are transformed by this deep engagement in who they are as people of faith, as human beings, and as sexual human beings with spiritual and moral values. They learn to make life-giving choices and appreciate the skills they gain to navigate some rocky waters.

Our research says Millennials are hopeful. The young people I know at church are bright and capable. They're affirming of – and affirmed by – their parents. They are excited about a church that cares about the things they care about – like climate change and bullying.

REFLECTIONS: *"God Is Still Speaking" – the UCC's official identity tag. What does it mean to you?*

BLACK: The statement speaks to God's ongoing revelation to us. It calls us to listen for God's voice. We can discern God speaking through scripture and worship and prayer – and in unexpected places. So we want young people to seek God's presence in their lives wherever they find themselves. In my experience, young people think that's a cool thing about their church: They can have a relationship with God as teenagers.

REFLECTIONS: *What would people miss if churches lose their influence?*

BLACK: First, there's an element of community that they hunger for which is beyond the nuclear family, a family feeling grounded in eternal values and history. The church is a unique institution that way. Churches are the only institution which is multi-generational by nature. This is a real gift we often overlook.

Yes, there are some traditional church models that don't work as well now, but that doesn't mean Christianity is invalid. Very few societies can go without some kind of spiritual entity. The church needs to adjust to the times, and that can be a struggle in a diverse society. But we are moving in creative ways. We have traditional churches that connect with people and we have emerging churches that are adapting to change. Both kinds are going to live side by side for some time to come.

The Calling of Christian Imagination

By Javier A. Viera

It took a guest preacher at our church to point out something that we needed to understand better. Over dinner on a beautiful summer Sunday, he posed a question he had asked himself earlier in the day: Why are there so many younger adults in a liturgically rooted, architecturally byzantine, chorally classical Methodist church in the middle of New York City?

I didn't have a ready answer for my friend. The overwhelming literature and supposed best practices assume that a ministry with this under-35 age cohort can succeed only with hip music, coffeehouse ambience, and high-energy programming.

But I suggested our experience was likely related to the relative youthfulness of New York. I also hoped it was a reflection of the authenticity of our

We have not yet made a compelling case for an alternative way of being, in which Christian identity is paramount.

worship experience, which was free of pandering or overt attempts to cater to a specific group – and no effort whatsoever at being hip.

Yet his question stayed with me. The truth was that as a staff we didn't understand why this was our congregational dynamic. This aspect of our life as a church was worth exploring more deeply. We should be able to explain it as more than mere coincidence.

Why They Come Back

A few months later that same guest preacher invited us to make a presentation at a conference. We were asked to describe what worked with people in their 20s and 30s. This was the catalyst for us to produce an in-depth questionnaire for this demographic – members of our church, mostly New Yorkers in their 20s and 30s – as a way to better understand their spiritual lives and practices.

The questions we put to them – about 120 respondents in all – ranged from their own religious backgrounds to their experience at Christ Church. There were questions about self-identification, devotional habits, political persuasions, and theological outlook. A final section allowed for responses about their personal aspirations and spiritual challenges.

In some ways the results were not surprising. Most said they came looking for community, or they were on a spiritual quest, sought comfort and sanctuary from the frenetic city pace, or needed a sense of moral grounding. When they described what kept them at Christ Church, they revealed something slightly different. What compelled them to stay was an experience of theological spaciousness and openness, intellectual vigor, the combination of liturgy, music, and architecture, and the community diversity they had formed.

I found these initial results heartening. Only later, however, when I gathered a group of the respondents to help me interpret the data more fully, did the true challenge to our work become clear to me.

First Loyalties

I began by focusing on their responses regarding self-identification. Without exception everyone agreed their work is what gave them identity above all else. Their church attendance, their Christian identity, was a “secret” they guarded closely and shared only on a need-to-know basis. As the discussion continued, other themes emerged:

- Their self-identification with work was simply the result of spending the vast majority of their time and energy toward that goal. Since childhood, most reported, they had been encouraged to aspire to the best job possible. Their work was their *raison d'être*, the value that mattered most to parents and family. Often even church involvement served that end. Their Christian faith was understood to be an element in the life of a well-rounded person. And a well-rounded person was more likely to secure well-paid employment. Their professional development was a lifelong pursuit.
- When pressed about their work priorities, most identified fear as a motivator. They feared not fulfilling family expectations. They feared not advancing professionally and economically. And they feared the potential social dislocation if their work and all its benefits did not remain their primary focus. Significantly, there was a shared sense that financial gain was not all it was made out to be – but they feared relaxing their pursuit of it because it is the most concrete measure of their own success and self-worth.
- Their spiritual interests would absolutely take a back seat to professional endeavors if necessary. This didn't imply they would compromise themselves ethically. Rather, work matters above all else.

The Prevailing Order

This admission shifted the conversation to the role of church in their lives. They affirmed the survey findings that church provides inspiration and moral grounding. But there is little doubt about first loyalties. As one participant put it, "Work gives me clear, tangible results that I can see and measure in my life. I don't get that same sense from the things we talk about or do at church, which can seem intangible, elusive, and at times overwhelming."

The conversation made it clear: We have not yet made a compelling case for an alternative way of being in the world, a way in which Christian identity and vocation are paramount. For these younger adults, joining the world of the prevailing economic order, its rhythms and aspirations, seemed like the only real and rational way of living. Yes, there was much to question and change in this world, but they felt powerless to do something about it.

The sense of resignation was breathtaking. Challenging the prevailing economic or political order did not at any point enter the conversation. Reconciling that reality with the spirit of the gospel is a pastoral conundrum. "For freedom Christ has set us free," wrote St. Paul. This sense of freedom to choose a different path, to be guided by an alter-

native ethic, to be part of a larger movement for transformation, was lacking in our conversation. Yet this freedom is central to Christian proclamation, the essence of what it means to be the church.

I believe intentional spiritual practice can enhance an experience of life. It can offer a bracing challenge to the prevailing order. But I fear it has become at best a supplemental interest in 21st-century routine. We have not made a persuasive case for it. Our self-study of young parishioners made this painfully clear to me.

The Magnificent Task

In the high-achieving culture of Manhattan – and surely elsewhere in our urbanized contemporary world – a life-giving message goes undervalued: the message of Christ's self-sacrificial love, solidarity

What compelled them to stay was theological spaciousness, intellectual vigor, the combination of liturgy, music, architecture, and diversity.

with the marginalized, compassionate regard for the other, and the transformation of the world to reflect the coming kingdom of God. It is often drowned out, or we fail to deliver it in a compelling way. That's the great task that is ever before us.

This is not to say that our community of 20- and 30-year-olds isn't engaged in serving the city and the world. The opposite is actually true. They are impressive in their quiet and regular commitment to feed the hungry, tutor struggling students, visit the aged, and travel the globe to build homes and health centers in desperately poor communities.

And yet: If this group of remarkable interlocutors is at all representative, this work is usually described as an attempt to "give back" and "do good." That is admirable indeed. Still, what seems lacking is a spiritual imagination to see that these efforts might lead to much more: They point to an alternative way, one that reorders commitments and values.

I walked away from this far-ranging conversation inspired by the possibility of awakening this spiritual imagination. It is, I would argue, among the most urgent tasks the church has before it. Spiritual imagination can help us reimagine how God might transform the world through us, and what a gift this would be to a world that desperately needs it.

The Rev. Javier Viera '00 S.T.M. is executive minister at Christ Church (United Methodist Church) in New York City. Originally from Puerto Rico, he has an M.Div. from Duke and an Ed.D. from Columbia.

We Stumble Towards Love

By Kat Banakis

We begin in Texas and end in heaven – as good a journey as any could hope for. But to tell you something about my theology and spirituality as a young person, I have to talk about late 20th-century immigration in America.

I'm in a high school classroom north of Dallas in 1994, making a theater set with my friend. We are freshmen. You know then that my friends are vitally important to me: I'm 14. And you know that it's the Bible Belt.

This you might not know: The population of Collin County, TX, went from approximately 70,000 in 1970 to over 700,000 in 2010, and immigrants came to the republic of Texas from all over the world. My closest friends' parents were born in Iran, China, and Russia and fled their respective political regimes but kept their faiths – Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish.

A perky blonde bounds up to the Russian Jew and me and says to my friend, "No offense, but you're going to hell." I tell this story not because it's unique but because for people born in the 1970s and 1980s, it isn't. And it shaped my theology.

Theology takes place in life. That's sort of the point of theology. Many of my closest friendships have always been with non-Christians, which is to say that I have come to know and love God through non-Christians, which is to say that exclusive salvation claims are incongruous with how I experience the God of universal love.

The Story of Salvation

Doctrine around salvation has never been a settled matter. It has been in a state of change since the New Testament. Paul thought Christ was coming back in his lifetime. Then the letters to Ephesians and Colossians connected salvation to rightly ordered lives. The early martyrs made suffering a pivotal part of salvation. Ignatius of Antioch declared, "Suffer me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God."

Augustine complicated things (still does). He was less sure who was saved and who was reprobate. "We cannot know," he wrote, who among us is sinner or saint. The Reformers picked up on the not knowing, each in his own way. We cannot know, but we can all acknowledge our fallenness (Luther), work towards holiness (Wesley), attend to right learning and action (Calvin).

We cannot know. We're alive on this side. We can, though, develop and deepen robust theologies of universal salvation that capture the energy of the pluralism of our times. Should we adopt "thinner theologies," as Philip Quinn argues?¹ Or is the an-

My generation will do church entirely differently and entirely the same and take our place in the river of saints who tried and tripped and tried again.

swer found in Marilyn McCord Adams's thick descriptions of universal judgment in which there is a public hearing of all one's actions – good and bad for every person?²

Something. I'm not sure what, but something. We can do better than exclusion or tolerance or patronizing.

We can stumble towards love.

I can't talk about theology without bringing up the march of American legal history. Children do children things on the playground behind the church I now serve just outside of Chicago. The littlest ones loft their legs unbelievably high to mount the steps of the slide to keep up. Old snow creeps into the tops of socks. Sticks transform from swords to spades to hopscotch borders in a moment.

Watching these kids, it's not obvious which kids go with which parents even on a weekday afternoon in a neighborhood full of military families. The ethnic and gender mix is a dramatic contemporary fact. It's fashioned by society's slow acceptance of difference. It's shaped by the sequence of congressional acts, legal cases, and constitutional amendments my ancestors passed – *Brown v. Board*, *Loving v. Virginia*, Fair Housing Act, Amendments 13, 14, 15, 19, 24, as well as the near-success of the Equal Rights Amendment and also that recent triumph of my peers, the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act.

The Long Battle of the Heart

Overt rights fights have been waged over many decades. Consciousness has been raised, if only enough to coin terms of political correctness. How do we fight that harder, longer battle of the heart? What is equal class opportunity? What does it look like to stand with oppressed persons today in a way that isn't token? Living theologically after Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone keeps forcing me to ask such questions.³

There's something of economic and architectural history in my theology and spirituality too. I preach and celebrate in front of an ornate stone *reredos* (Middle English: "back behind") that was built with robber baronish money a hundred-odd years ago. The congregation thought about trying to sell off the building or parts of it during the latest recession, but the local real estate market was so shook up that no one bit on the offer. I'm glad.

The carvings behind the altar are all saints of the British Isles. Among them are St. Hilda, teacher and political strategist; St. Aidan, who worked throughout his life with people on the margins, particularly children and slaves; St. Bridget of Kildare, an artist; St. Eanswith, the founder of the first women's monastery in England; and St. Edward the Confessor, a monarch who instituted tax reform. They performed the miracle of living as best they could and transforming their societies as they were able. Bless them.

They preside over our congregational comings and goings. Would the church I serve make them gasp? The unbaptized young and old take communion. The cohabitating come forward for prayers for the betrothed, some for their third marriages. Only a statistical fraction of the babies here were made and born and cared for through their first few months without some sort of medical intervention. The parents are so tired that sometimes they don't even take off the baby carrier straps before collaps-

ing into a pew and handing an infant off to some proxy aunt or uncle.

I hope the saints of yore would adore us – us with our ardent efforts to be good employers and employees and job candidates and spouses and parents and singles who gather again and again to know and love and serve God better.

Augustine (Him again? Him again – he's too much a part of the cultural lexicon to ignore) has that part where he talks about the two cities of God – the one on earth and the one in heaven of the saints. Maybe, though, there are three churches: One is the

The church in heaven is where they are rooting for the church on earth to keep trying to learn more and love more.

pristine church of collective imagination, where it always resides unadulterated and unmarred by sinful motivations or the society around it. Then there is the real-time church of the unwashed us. Third is the church in heaven, the place of all the saints who have gone before us, where they are rooting for the church on earth to keep on trucking, keep on trying to learn more and love more.

Jesus bids the working stiff "follow me," and, miracle of miracles, they did. We do. But none of us has wholly sure footing as we pad after the great I AM. My generation with impossibly long lives ahead of it will do church entirely differently and entirely the same and take our place in the river of saints who tried and tripped and tried again.

Kat Banakis '03 B.A., '09 M.Div. is the author of Bubble Girl: An Irreverent Journey of Faith (Chalice, 2013), which focuses on intergenerational theological reflection. She works full-time in data analytics and as a priest at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Evanston, IL.

Notes

- 1 Phillip Quinn, "Towards Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on Religious Diversity" in *Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Christian Miller (Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 2 Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, Cornell University Press, 2000).
- 3 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Orbis, 1973); James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Harper & Row, 1969).

Am I A “None”?

By Betsy Shirley

The intensive care unit demands truth, not euphemism. It's a place to measure out options in time, costs, and chances; a place where people say "die" instead of "pass away." So when a patient in the ICU replied, "No thanks, I don't go to church," after I introduced myself as a chaplain, I blurted out what I'm often too ashamed to admit: me neither.

In religious circles, it's generated a frenzy of responses: One in five American adults now has no religious affiliation. Among young people, one in three. In headlines, this phenomenon is known as "the rise of the 'nones,'" named for those who check "nothing in particular" when asked about their religious affiliation. Now, more than 18 months after the Pew Research Center published this statistic in October 2012, there's one thing everyone still wants to know: Why?

There are theories. Many blame the church itself, its political divisions, its suspicions of unfamiliar sexual orientations, its failure to be "relevant." Some blame individualism, consumerism, and anti-

Though I check "Christian" on surveys, I'm not affiliated with any denomination or church. So I wondered: Am I a none?

institutionalism, the hallmarks of a generation they fear will never see beyond the edges of its iPhones. Others say young people are living at home longer, getting married later, and generally not rushing the whole adulthood thing, creating a generation-wide *rumspringa* of youthful exploration and freedom, a delay in customary adult commitments, like choosing a religion.

I followed the headlines with interest and read the full 80-page report. Though most reactions to nones have focused on their namesake trait – their lack of religious affiliation – the Pew study carefully portrays them as nuanced, paradoxical, and rarely secular.

Many of them, for example, believe in God and pray regularly. Nones tend to think religious institutions are too focused on money, power, rules, and politics, yet 78 percent of them still believe churches strengthen the community and help reduce poverty. And though they aren't seeking to join any religious group right now, nones were largely mainline and evangelical Protestants as children. Demographically, they are most likely unmarried, under 30, and moderate-to-liberal in their politics.

Something Looked Familiar

I stared at my computer screen, startled. Nones seemed a lot like me. Though I check "Christian" on surveys, I'm not affiliated with any denomination or church. I grew up in evangelical megachurches, but have since stopped attending. I don't want to abolish churches, but neither am I looking to join one. So I wondered: Am I a none?

One thing is certain: I never intended to become a none. As an evangelical teenager, I was so worried by stories of 20-somethings who had gone off to college and lost their faith that I wrote earnest letters to my future self. "Are you married now? Who are your friends?" I wrote on three-holed loose leaf. "And please, please tell me you still love Jesus." I kept the letters in a box, to be opened on various birthdays throughout my 20s, a form of insurance, I hoped, against a possibility that seemed too terrifying to face.

I survived four years at a liberal arts university, faith intact, but irrevocably altered. What I hadn't understood as a 13-year-old is that faith cannot be tucked away and preserved in a box like my letters.

It's a living, growing thing, for which survival means change. And though I definitely loved Jesus at age 13, I was also fairly convinced that homosexuality was a sin, evolution was an evil scheme of secular scientists, and the Book of Revelation was a more or less literal account of what would happen in the end times. It's good that faith changes. It's necessary.

Spiritual Puberty

By the time I graduated from college, I started to think that loving Jesus was less about channeling emotive output towards a Lord whose name I lifted on high, and more about reflecting God's self-giving love towards others.

Yet outgrowing beliefs is uncomfortable, a spiritual puberty every bit as awkward as its biological counterpart. I didn't feel at home in the nondenominational, evangelical communities where I grew up, but hadn't figured out what was next. Mainline Protestantism seemed attractive, but almost like a

Simply put, church wore me out. Every week added to the litany of "more" – more involvement, more money, more projects, more retreats, more meetings.

mirage. They ordained women? Welcomed queer folks? Integrated faith and justice, belief and doubt, the intellect and the spirit? It seemed too good to be true.

Family history indicated I'd likely join a new denomination in my 20s. My grandmother was raised Methodist, but converted to Roman Catholicism in her late 20s. My mother left Catholicism in her 20s and joined a nondenominational Bible church after a friend showed her a Campus Crusade tract. So if I'd left evangelicalism to join the mainline folks, the generational cycle would have made a tidy circle.

But, to the surprise of everyone except the Pew researchers, I didn't.

A Season of Weariness

Throughout my early 20s, I lived in five different states and attended at least as many churches. I experimented with different denominations, but one thing was consistent: I dreaded going to church.

Simply put, church wore me out. Every week added to the litany of "more" – more involvement, more volunteers, more money, more projects, more retreats, more meetings, more events. There was always something else the love of Christ was compelling us to do – good things, but I just couldn't keep up. On Sundays we sang hymns and prayed

beautiful words of praise and gratitude that sounded nothing like the weariness I actually felt.

It's okay, I coaxed myself. *Live into the discomfort. Church is about commitment, not about feelings. Be the hands and feet of Jesus.* I feared what leaving church might mean: floating off into a self-centered, self-helpy spirituality detached from other people. I added my name to sign-up sheets for small groups and soup kitchens, hoping the practice of just showing up would stir my lukewarm heart.

But mostly, I just felt guilty. I knew church was supposed to be life-giving, challenging, supportive – certainly not easy, but, at the very least, good. I didn't know why it sucked the life out of me, and I prayed for help.

Eventually I realized that what I liked best about going to church was rounding up a group of people afterwards to talk over coffee or bagels. *This is blasphemy, pure and simple*, I thought. *Jesus came so that we might have life, not brunch.* Yet I had to admit that sharing conversation over coffee seemed more life-giving than church. Soon after, I stopped going to church and went straight to brunch. It felt more honest.

An Intentional New Path

While sorting out all these feelings about church, I joined a series of intentional communities. The first was in urban Indianapolis, where I spent a summer interning at a creative writing center and living in an old Victorian house with 12 other students. After college I moved into an eight-person community in a row house in Columbia Heights in Washington, D.C., sharing a food budget, attempting to compost, and working for *Sojourners* magazine. Shortly after, I spent a season chasing errant chickens and teaching ESL to Burmese refugees at a 40-person community in rural Georgia.

Whatever the goals of intentional community may be, it always ends up as a crash course in learning to love people who irritate the heck out of you. Alternately, it is letting others see you at your personal worst and allowing them to love you anyway, which I've found to be harder.

But amidst perpetually broken dishwashers, floors that were never clean, and pots of soup that were stretched to feed whoever showed up, I started to notice God's presence in a way I'd never experienced in church. I saw God as we made room for unexpected guests, washed mounds of dishes, and took turns shoveling out the snowy driveway with one broken shovel. I saw God in housemates who shared their food, cars, and compassion in ways I didn't deserve – mundane moments of learning to

love and be loved, a very tangible form of grace. I was grateful.

It was these moments – reminders that God transcends the boundaries of religious affiliation – that ultimately led me to divinity school. I knew there were other people like me, people who couldn't seem to find God in the church or their religious institution but were desperate to encounter God

It was these moments – reminders that God transcends the boundaries of religious affiliation – that ultimately led me to divinity school.

nonetheless. And I didn't know how, exactly, but I wanted to help these people find God in their lives, in classrooms, in the community, and, as it turns out, in hospitals.

Holy Ground

So here's what happens if you let it slip that you're a chaplain who doesn't go to church: A couple of patients will frown, some will rattle off a list of churches you should try, and a few will hand you a gospel tract. But the rest will ask you to pull up a chair.

With beeping medical equipment in the background, these patients will tell you things they'd never admit to someone wearing a collar: that they don't go to church but they have questions about God, faith, death, and suffering.

Their stories are not all the same – they talk about good churches, bad churches, other religions. They describe God as a loving parent, a capricious trickster, or not at all. They talk about the ways they find meaning in life, through their families, their community, their life's work, and, occasionally, their pets. As they pour out their hearts, you recognize you are on holy ground, right there in the ICU.

So you listen. And as you listen, you catch a glimpse of a God who always seemed to be among the folks who didn't quite fit in. It's odd, but you're grateful that your sojourn outside of churches allows you to empathize with them and the profound sense of loss that comes when they're no longer able to find God in church.

Several years ago I came across the Benedictine motto *succisa virescit* – “cut down, it ever grows again.” At the time, the motto struck me as an emblem of the twin Benedictine vows to constant stability and ever-deepening conversion. And that's true, but now I recognize it as an emblem of an even older Christian truth: resurrection.

I'll admit there are some dark nights out here in this world where religious affiliation is blurry. Some days I think I should suck it up and just get myself into a pew. Other days I wonder what I would write to my 13-year-old self if I could send a letter back to her.

But it is this pattern – a pattern of life amidst death, light amidst darkness, new growth amidst what was cut down – that gives me hope, even as a growing number of Americans, myself included, struggle to recognize God in the church. To me, this is the terrifying, beautiful paradox of the gospel: Salvation looks like destruction. So although we may show up on polls as “none,” I am confident that something is there, something holy and complicated and good springing to life.

Betsy Shirley '15 M.Div. is from Milwaukee. Her work has been published in Sojourners magazine, where she was formerly editorial assistant. She currently lives in a community of eight divinity students in New Haven.

THE CHOICE

By Nate Klug

To stand sometime
outside my faith

to steady it
caught and squirming on a stick
up to mind's
inviting light

and name it!
for all its faults and facets

or keep waiting

to be claimed in it

Young Souls in Transition:

An Interview with Christian Smith



For the last decade, sociologist Christian Smith has been a leading specialist in tracking the spiritual lives of young people as they move into adulthood.

Three books since 2005, written with research associates, report on the variety of religious attitudes that young people take with them, leave behind, or revise along the way. The books are Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (Oxford, 2005), Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults (Oxford, 2009), and Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood (Oxford, 2011).

In Lost in Transition, Smith identifies struggles of many young people today – confused moral reasoning, routine intoxication, materialistic life goals, regrettable sexual experiences, indifference to civic life – in a pressurized 24/7 world of consumerism and postmodern relativism.

Smith is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at Notre Dame. His latest book is Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church (Oxford).

REFLECTIONS: *You've cautioned readers against being alarmist about the problems of emerging adults – and against being complacent too?*

SMITH: As a sociologist my job is to tell the truth about the world as accurately as possible. I'm not a Chicken Little, but I do see troubling things. I think it's complacent to sell out totally to the culture and say the kids are all fine. I think Christian tradition can give younger people some measure of distance on the cultural pressures and influences we see.

REFLECTIONS: *What does religion mean to people these days?*

SMITH: In the emerging adult years, what many think about "religion" is: It's just not something that matters to them. Religion is seen as something they might take an interest in later in life, like life insurance. They aren't angry about it. It's just given a presupposed dismissal.

REFLECTIONS: *Wasn't it always this way with rising generations?*

SMITH: I'm not a good-old-days sociologist, but I do think former generations were religiously more engaged, more literate. The digital, social media revolution has created a new world. It affects what young people's eyes are focused on – the world of screens – and what matters to them and how they form community. Technology has consequences for epistemology, the nature of authority and trust.

REFLECTIONS: *Can churches be a counterforce?*

SMITH: Yes, churches ought to be able to create an alternative community, an open-handed community where people can encounter each other, network, and hear a different word, but without necessarily being expected to sign up as members for the next 30 years. People are sucked into the dominant culture, but many sense the dominant culture isn't ultimately fulfilling. They know mass consumer capitalism isn't enough. Churches are in a position to confirm this hunch.

Young people – teens – are under incredible pressure to perform. Intense expectations are placed on them. As a colleague of mine has suggested, social media appears to be all about social performance, creating a personality that isn't real, and teens are experiencing a deep unhappiness about this. I think churches are in a position to create a social space where people can be accepted for who they are and not be expected to perform. I've seen some congregations that do this.

REFLECTIONS: *Still, you find apathy about church.*

SMITH: If there's one thing I know about younger people, whether they are 13 or 28, nearly every last one of them thinks of Christianity as a set of rules and regulations, do's and don'ts. They aren't necessarily fighting against that. That's simply what they think Christianity is – a set of moralisms. The church is a place of moralistic requirements.

And that's very understandable. Parents want their kids to turn out okay, and they rely on the church for moral guidance so they learn to behave. Parents are trying to cope with a world where lots of things can go wrong. There are lots of threats. But I think it can lead to a form of idolatry to treat the church this way. I feel for pastors. They are faced with this expectation from parents.

REFLECTIONS: *How does a church stand for the gospel without sounding moralistic?*

SMITH: I don't think techniques and practices are going to change the situation. Churches need to attack moralism wherever they see it and show what the gospel really is. Congregations need to have a conversation: What is Christianity? What is God for us? What is the power of the gospel?

Religion might be irrelevant to emerging adults as a group, but that does not mean they are hostile to it. Many are intrigued. They want to talk about it. Many who were raised non-religious feel culturally deprived of this big part of life. Many churches seem to think that non-religious young people are all atheistic like Richard Dawkins, but they aren't. They're aware that they don't know much about religious tradition. Many want a conversation. If churches don't make an effort to engage, it won't happen.

REFLECTIONS: *How did we get to this moment of disconnection from religious institutions?*

SMITH: I'm against blaming young people. And I don't think church has failed. In the mid-20th century you could say there was a map in place that helped organize society. It featured well-defined units – family, religion, education, government, the military. Each had boundaries. Each had a role and respected the others. But those boundaries have broken down. The map isn't in place. All of life is now being ordered by narratives and images that don't reflect the old boundaries. Churches have something to say about this. They should go back

Religion might be irrelevant to emerging adults as a group, but that does not mean they are hostile to it. Many are intrigued. They want to talk about it.

again and again to the drinking well of the gospel and offer a true alternative transcendent story. If they can't do that, if they remain saddled with moralism, then they better hang it up now.

REFLECTIONS: *Where does your research take you next?*

SMITH: I plan to focus on parents. In our work over the years, what has hit us harder than we realized is the role of parents in shaping their children's spirituality. Despite the arguments today that sideline parents by placing great importance on the influence of peer groups and media, we find that parents are still the most powerful sociological force in transmitting spirituality and religion to their children. So I want to study how parents' life commitments and priorities affect young people. Many parents feel inadequate and put-upon, but I hope they realize they still matter.



Twin Calamities: Declining Churches, Struggling Young

By Skip Masback

Too many of our churches and our young are struggling. Too many of our denominations and congregations are struggling because they are failing to transmit the faith to a rising generation, and too many of our young are struggling because they lack the foundations that were traditionally supplied by communities of the faith. To paraphrase the lyrics of a great band from my “ge-ge-ge-generation,” neither the churches nor the kids are all right.

What’s crucial here is that these two dynamics, the trajectory of struggling churches and the trend of struggling youth, are related – and neither of them will be resolved until we deepen the faith, commitment, and professionalism with which we minister to our young.¹

Let me begin with an old sermon illustration chestnut. One day a constable found a body floating in the river that flowed through his little village. The discovery caused great sadness and puzzlement. When no one arrived to claim the body, the villagers dutifully donated materials to construct a coffin and conducted a funeral. It was the least they could do.

A week later, however, a villager found another body in the river, and then another, and another, and so on. After a month of this, the village was just plain worn out by all the coffin construction and funerals. So one day, the constable decided to hike upstream to see what was going on.

After following the river two miles into the foothills, the constable found a small footbridge washed out. Footprints indicated that travelers had been trying to get across the river without the bridge and had been swept away by the current. The next day the villagers trooped up the trail to construct a new footbridge and solved the problem for a generation.

If you are a minister to youth, my guess is that you have already noticed some calamities washing into your downstream village of parish life. If you haven’t yet, you certainly will discover the following: First, virtually all of our so-called mainline denominations are suffering an alarming decline in

membership, particularly among so-called Generation Xers and Millennials.² And, second, many of our churches, schools, universities, and folks who

We find abundant evidence that a principal reason there are so few young adults in the pews downstream is that we are failing to transmit the faith to our children upstream.

study or practice adolescent psychology and psychotherapy are reporting an alarming deterioration in adolescent mental health.³ As I sketch the outlines of these two calamities, see if it doesn’t become apparent that, in both instances, the “upstream footbridge” that needs to be rebuilt is a passionate and dedicated ministry with and to our youth.

Bridge Repair

We have all been bombarded with the dispiriting statistics of declining denominations and churches. Mainline Protestants are grabbing all the headlines, but thoughtful Roman Catholics and evangelicals are now puzzling over their own worrisome trends as well. These patterns seem to be accelerating among rising generations. According to a 2010 Pew Charitable Trust report, “Religion Among the Millennials”:

Fully one-in-four members of the Millennial generation – so called because they were born after 1980 and began to come of age around the year 2000 – are unaf-

affiliated with any particular faith. Indeed, Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20 percent in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13 percent in the late 1970s).⁴

It must be self-evident that no denomination, no church, can prosper downstream if its ranks aren't being replenished by young adults arriving in the pews to take up the mantle of their elders. And, when we troop upstream, we find abundant evidence that one of the principal reasons there are so few young adults in the pews downstream is that we are failing to transmit the faith to our children upstream.

Failure to Launch

"The underlying problem of the mainline churches cannot be solved by new programs of church development alone," write Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald Luidens. "Somehow, in the course of the past century, these churches lost the will or the ability to teach the Christian faith and what it requires to a succession of younger cohorts in such a way as to command their allegiance."⁵

In her book *OMG: A Youth Ministry Handbook* (Abingdon, 2010), Kenda Creasy Dean begins with a series of devastating citations:

- "Most teenagers who have spent years attending church activities [have not integrated their faith] into who they are and how they live." (George Barna, 2003)
- "Our distinct impression is that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating youth." (Christian Smith, 2004)
- "The levels of disengagement among twenty-somethings suggest that youth ministry fails too often at discipleship and faith formation." (David Kinnaman, 2006)

We all recall that Jesus commissioned his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). The upstream evidence is that we are falling short of that commission with our own children.

Let's turn to a brief downstream examination of the declining mental health and well-being of our adolescents. We have all learned that proof of correlation does not necessarily mean proof of causation. Still, there is a worrisome decline in adolescent well-

being that parallels the decline in religious affiliation and connectedness.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that all adolescents are suffering. I was in youth ministry for 21 years, and I could fill hundreds of pages with reflections on the amazing, creative, intelligent young people I was blessed to know. Every community

It is magical thinking to believe we can throw a few crumbs from the church budget table, underpay a revolving-door cast of rookie youth ministers, and trust that a few mumbled prayers will convert pizza, games, and mission trips into a body of Christ.

has its own particular blend of the sour and sweet in adolescent health and development, challenges and suffering.

Still, the anecdotal concerns of youth ministers, teachers, and psychotherapists are confirmed by statistical surveys done regionally and nationally. As the chief of Mental Health Services at Harvard University advised,

If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function . . . and one in 10 that he or she will seriously consider suicide. In fact, since 1988, the likelihood of a college student's suffering depression has doubled, [and] suicide ideation has tripled, and sexual assaults have quadrupled.⁶

According to the 2003 Commission on Children at Risk: "Scholars at the National Research Council in 2002 estimated that at least one of every four adolescents in the U.S. is currently at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood."⁷ According to another study, about 21 percent of U.S. children ages 9 to 17 have diagnosable mental or addictive disorders associated with at least minimum impairment.⁸

To these general statements, let me add two other statistics:

- "Studies in adults and one study in youth suggested that each successive generation since 1940 is at greater risk of developing depressive disorders and that these disorders have their onset at a younger age."⁹
- By the 1980s U.S. children as a group were reporting more anxiety than were children who were psychiatric patients in the 1950s.¹⁰

Accompanying these diagnostic findings are observations that many of our young seem to lack a sense of higher purpose or meaning in their lives. As David White noted in one of our “Youth Ministry: Now” lectures at Yale Divinity School last year, “In 1970, [of] entering college freshman 70 percent of them could talk about their hopes for a vocation that served a common good. Less than 30 percent lacked this sense of purpose. That statistic has flipped now.” Less than 30 percent of entering college freshman can talk about their hopes for a vocation that serve a common good; more than 79 percent report a lack of this sense of purpose.¹¹

Maladaptive Culture

At the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, director Miroslav Volf has been making a similar point in the God and Human Flourishing Program. His critique describes a widespread culture that is offering our young a maladaptive account of human well-being, drifting away from the religious, philosophical, and artistic resources that previous generations had called on to equip their children to discern what

Through Christ, God has given us the time-tested plan for building an authoritative community. God’s name for it is “church.”

makes life worth living. Without knowing how to discuss and answer for themselves that question, Volf asserts, our children remain ignorant of the purposes of life. They become perhaps experts in understanding and manipulating their environment but amateurs in knowing to what end they should do so.

In sum, whenever you and I go out to our village’s stream, we are likely to find another troubling missive from the Center for Disease Control washed up on our banks, another report on the sad numbers of kids suffering with aimless drift, anxiety disorders, chronic depression, thoughts of suicide, or other self-destructive behaviors.¹² Like our proverbial villagers, we can wring our hands and exhaust ourselves coping with the consequences, or we can hike upstream to see what’s going on.

Some years ago, the National Commission on Children at Risk decided to take that upstream hike, gathering a blue-ribbon panel of professors of adolescent and pediatric psychology and psychotherapy. They concluded that the crisis in adolescent mental suffering and maladjustment was caused by raising children in an unhealthy culture characterized by diminished social connectedness. The commission

concluded that children flourish better where supported by what they called “Authoritative Communities.” How did the commission define a healthy, authoritative community? Here are the characteristics. As you read, ask yourself if you have ever seen such a community:

- It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
- It treats children as ends in themselves.
- It is warm and nurturing.
- It establishes clear boundaries and limits.
- It is defined and guided at least partly by non-specialists.
- It is multi-generational.
- It has a long-term focus.
- It encourages spiritual and religious development.
- It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
- It is philosophically oriented to the dignity of all persons and to the love of neighbor.¹³

Authoritative Solution

The National Commission is the most impressive panel I have ever seen convened on children’s issues, but am I the only one who’s thinking God could have saved them a little time and money? Through Christ, God has given us the time-tested plan for building an authoritative community. God’s name for it is “church.”

As Kenda Creasy Dean reminds us in *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*:

Ancient youth like Jacob and Esau grew up at a time when questions like “Who are my people? Why am I here? What gives my life meaning and coherence?” were answered, literally, by the faith of their fathers, not by theories of ego development. Yet these questions of belonging, purpose, and ideology remain at the core of human identity; while we have learned to think of them as psychological issues, such questions have historically fallen to religion to answer, ritualized in the traditions and practices of communities that seek to embody a particular story of identity.¹⁴

We Christians profess a Christ who comes “that [we] might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We are spiritual descendants of the Paul who exhorted us to “take hold of the life that really is life” (First Timothy 6:19). We preach that a life that dies to self and rises with Christ, a life that lives out Christ’s love commandment, offers, per-

haps counter-intuitively, the most appropriate and healthy prescription for human flourishing. We have a 2,000-year heritage from our scripture and traditions for gathering our young into bodies of Christ, into youth ministries, with thick connections of love, nurture, and support.

At its best, ministry with and to youth creates the time and space for adults to walk alongside young people in deep relationship, characterized by “caritas, covenant, and community”: unconditional love and acceptance, clear and understandable commitments and boundaries, and participation in something larger than themselves. When we are true to our calling – when we strive to reach out to all of our kids who are suffering, afflicted, or struggling for their faith – when we embrace *all* our kids with unconditional love and acceptance, the beauty and joy that result can be astonishing.

More Than Crumbs

But the resources and prescriptions of our faith are not self-executing. It is magical thinking to believe that we can throw a few crumbs from the church budget table, underpay a revolving-door cast of rookie youth ministers, and trust that a few mumbled prayers will convert pizza, games, and mission trips into either a body of Christ or an authoritative community.

More than 100 years ago, G. Stanley Hall coined the term “adolescence,” arguing that it was a “golden stage” when life glistens and crackles – a “vernal season of the heart” uniquely open to experiencing and sharing joy and love and uniquely susceptible to suffering their absence.¹⁵ Erik Erikson saw that adolescence was “a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution; for youth selectively offers its loyalties and energies to the conservation of that which feels true to them and to the correction or destruction of that which has lost its regenerative significance.”¹⁶

When the church ministers to its youth with passion, commitment, and professionalism, it provides the nurture they require for human flourishing and reaps the fruits of their regenerative energies. When we do not – because we’ve set other priorities, or don’t mobilize the resources, or undervalue the importance of these ministries – we set a stumbling block before our children. As we have seen, the consequences of this neglect are calamitous for both the churches and the children that we know and love.

The Rev. Harold (Skip) Masback '94 M.Div. is managing director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. He practiced law for 14 years before enrolling at YDS. He was minister of First Congregational Church of New Canaan, CT., from 1994 to 2013. He also helped develop the Yale Divinity School Bible Study program for local churches.

Notes

- 1 See a fuller version of this article, with complete references, at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture website at <http://faith.yale.edu/>.
- 2 See Pew Research Center’s 2010 study, “Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials>. See also Barna Group, “Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials,” posted May 9, 2013, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/612-three-spiritual-journeys-of-millennials#.UnaZjZHnISV>.
- 3 Sherry Benton, et al., “Changes in Counseling Center Client Problems Across 13 Years,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2003), pp. 1-2, 66-72. They examined studies involving 13,257 student-clients who sought counseling at a large midwestern university between 1988-2001.
- 4 Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, “Religion Among the Millennials,” Feb. 17, 2010, www.pewforum.org.
- 5 Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge and Donald A. Luidens, “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline,” *First Things*, March 1993, p. 18.
- 6 Richard Kadison and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 1.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Rena D. Harold, Lisa G. Colarossi, and Lucy R. Mercier, *Smooth Sailing or Stormy Waters? Family Transitions and Their Implications for Practice and Policy* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007), p. 8.
- 9 Boris Birmaher, M.D., and David Brent, M.D., “Practice Parameter for the Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents With Depressive Disorders,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 46 (11), November 2007, p. 1427. The World Health Organization corroborates cause for concern: “Recent studies have identified mental health problems, in particular depression, as the largest cause of the burden of disease among young people.” World Health Organization, “Adolescent Health Epidemiology” (2012), Department of

Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health.
www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/
adolescence/mental_health/en/.

- 10 Jean M. Twenge, "The Age of Anxiety? Birth Cohort Change in Anxiety and Neuroticism, 1952-1993," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000), p. 1007.

Also: "Childhood and adolescence is the core risk phase for the development of anxiety symptoms and syndromes, ranging from transient mild symptoms to full-blown anxiety disorders," according to Beesdo, Katja, Knappe, and Pine, "Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents: Developmental Issues and Implications for DSM-V." *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, (September 2009), vol. 32, issue 3, p. 483.

- 11 David F. White, "Practicing a Theology of Youth, Spirit and Vocation," <http://new.livestream.com/yaledivinityschool/YMI>.
- 12 As horrifying as these reports of depression and suicide are, our anecdotal experience confirms them. Extraordinary numbers of the young people in the youth groups I served were on anti-depressants at one point or another in high school. Three members of the 1999 New Canaan High School graduating class committed suicides within five years of graduation. Five Wellesley Village High School students committed suicides in a span of just four years. In my last full year serving a church, I was called upon to intervene in four adolescent suicide attempts.
- 13 Compare findings and prescription in Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding our Families* (G.P. Putnan's Sons, 1996). When Pipher went upstream, she found a widespread breakdown of family and communal connectedness. She suggested we emulate the Lakota Sioux. The Sioux have a concept of community they call *Tiospaye*. The *Tiospaye* connects its members unconditionally, protects them from adversity, and teaches the stories and values of the tribe.
- 14 Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, 2010), p. 8.
- 15 G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, Vol. 2 (Appleton, 1921), p. 142.
- 16 Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (Norton, 1964), p. 126.

I was
relieved
to find
a church
a few
years ago
that
valued
my
questions
and
prodding.

Where
I could
debate
and
challenge
to my
heart's
content
finally
letting
go of
Jesus.

There's
just
one
problem.

He
didn't
return
the
favor.



The Ministry of Questioning Everything

By Almeda M. Wright

I am both hopeful and saddened as I reflect on young people and their connections to Christian traditions and communities. Many young people still consider religion an important part of their lives.¹ But increasingly youth and young adults do not feel that churches welcome their involvement or the issues significant to them.²

The narratives of the young men and women I have interviewed over the past decade propel me in my work to empower congregations and individuals along their journey of faith development. Marissa, a 17-year-old from the Northeast, captures the complexity when she states, “... *My church is constantly begging for youth, and when they have them in the church, they like run them off; they are constantly ‘you can’t do this,’ and it violates our youth ...*”

Marissa hears the hypocrisy or confusion of so many congregations who purport to want youth and young adult involvement but then remain closed to

As a tween, at the age of 12, Jesus inaugurates his own ministry of questions. He sits in the temple among the teachers, inquiring.

their ideas and gifts. Marissa’s language emphasizes the pain of many young people who attempt to work within religious communities.

As I ponder Marissa’s critique, I also reflect on the kinds of faith formation found in the Bible and the life of Jesus. The narratives about Jesus’ ministry are full of boundary crossing, questioning the establishment, and hanging out with more sinners than saints. I see a model of youth ministry based on Jesus as *the one who questions everything*.

As a tween, at the age of 12, Jesus inaugurates his own ministry of questions. He sits in the temple among the teachers, inquiring. And he not only questions but begins to amaze those who encounter his pre-teen zeal for knowledge – “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and

his answers” (Luke 2:47). In true adolescent fashion, Jesus gets caught up in what he was doing, loses track of time, fails to tell his parents where he was going to be. And when he is chastised for getting left behind, he *sasses* his mother – saying, “Didn’t you know I have to be about my father’s business?” (Luke 2: 41-52)

Pushing Back

From this starting point, we see numerous examples of Jesus’ direct challenges to the practices of his day.

Jesus questions the traditions of *not* healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6). Jesus questions social structures by lifting up little children as models for the kingdom of God (Mark 10:14-15) and teaching that “some who are first shall be last” (Mark 10:31).

He challenges the corruption in the Jerusalem temple, when he reminds the people that God’s house is supposed to be a house of prayer but they have made it into a den of thieves (Matthew 21:12-13).

He questions the generational relationships between Samaritans and Jews and he esteems the Samaritan as a model of care for the neighbor (Luke 10:25-37).

He also questions some of the traditions of interaction between men and women by engaging with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4).

In general, he questions socio-political and religious norms by embodying a compassionate vision of the kingdom of God, which had very little in common with contemporary political structures.

The idea of Jesus having a ministry of “questioning everything” is not simply an intriguing interpretive lens for reading about the life of Jesus. For me it

is a reminder of an essential element of youth and young adult spirituality: Each generation is involved in a journey of *making faith its own*.

Trying It On

Young adults look at the traditions that have been passed down to them. They strive to see if or how the tradition works and how it can shape their lives. In my observation, the traditions that hold are not primarily the ones young people take on unquestioningly. Instead, the enduring traditions are those that youth are allowed to wrestle with, to *try on*, and to eventually become shaped by. I often remind students preparing for youth ministry that the last thing they want is a group of young people who take everything they say about God and life without challenge. When youth fail to question, they most often fail to make the tradition their own.

It would be unfair for me to propose questioning as the norm of adolescent and young adult spirituality without acknowledging the difficulties that ques-

When youth fail to question, they fail to engage and fail to make the tradition their own.

tions raise. For the most part, religious communities and families are created around understandings of their identity, purpose, and usefulness. And this tentative identity is often what feels challenged by an onslaught of questions.

When a younger person questions why or how something is done, there is a fear that the young (now seen as an outsider) is intentionally contesting the community's sense of who they are and why they exist. The *outsiders* are challenging "the way things have always been done" – and by extension challenging the group's particular and unique identity. Some innocent questions can morph into unwitting threats to ways of being.

However, most questions emerge not from a place of wanting to destroy traditions, but from wanting to understand how things function and how they connect with the vast array of life experiences.

As a kid I loved clocks. I wanted to know how they worked and why they made the tick-tick noises. I wanted to know about the circular parts in the back. As my questions became more difficult, my fascination with clocks pushed me to explore the inside of them. Such that at some ridiculously young age, I began taking clocks apart and putting them back together. My curiosity was never intended to rid the world of all clocks. My exploration was born out of a genuine fascination with them.

My early childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood was also a time when my curiosity and questions intersected with my religious life. From these experiences I began to see the importance of questions in the life and work of thriving religious communities. I struggled and then learned to wear as a badge of honor the prestige of often "getting kicked out of Bible study." In college and the early months of divinity school, pastors and leaders shot down my ideas or questions in public forums.

Conversation Partners

Lucky for my faith journey and for me, after getting silenced publicly, I was glad to see that some pastors and community members wanted to continue the conversations (in private). Knowing that my theology was evolving, I struggled to return to Bible study in my congregation. But it is clear now that had I not continued to question and to have conversation partners, I would not have persisted in faith or pursued a passion of helping others grow in faith.

James Fowler, in his seminal text *Stages of Faith*, describes changes in faith that typically occur during late adolescence or early adulthood, when young people have experiences that call into question the symbols, images, practices, and traditions of their communities of origin.

Sometimes the trigger can be a first romantic relationship or a cross-cultural friendship. In light of these experiences, their faith becomes more critically reflective and individuated. And sometimes the communities come up lacking or the practices seem insufficient. In other circumstances, young adults recognize they have to wrestle with the faith tradition and imagine it in new ways in order to make it their own – and not simply accept the faith of their parents, pastor, or friends.

In Fowler's theory, many young adults – just by nature of maturing – encounter questions that can then lead either to a crisis of faith or an enlightening moment. Embracing the importance of faith questions prepares communities for the turbulent changes young adults will experience as they move through life. When we accept questions as a way of being faithful we begin to live into the inquisitive faith of Jesus, and we honor the fullness of who God has created us to be.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that any community that wants to survive beyond a generation has to concern itself with education.³ Like Fowler, Brueggemann proposes a model of education and community that honors questions. He accounts for the inquisitive young children, who are yearning to know the narratives of the community. He notes the

ruptures – often the prophetic speaking of truth to power – of adolescents and young adults, who offer new eyes and skills to question our complicity with the status quo. Brueggemann’s model includes the

Had I not continued to question and to have conversation partners, I would not have persisted in faith or pursued a passion of helping others grow in faith.

wisdom tradition, which emerges only from attending to (and I would add exploring or questioning) what we see and learn as we live.

Each of these forms of inquisitive learning shows us a way to be more welcoming to actual young people – with all of their innovations and annoying questions as well as their genuine sense that we can do things differently.

A faithful embrace of questions reminds us that each generation is saying with Jesus: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

Almeda M. Wright is assistant professor of religious education at YDS. She is co-editor of the book Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World (Chalice Press, 2008). She has a B.S. from MIT, an M.A.T. from Simmons College, an M.Div. from Harvard, and a Ph.D. from Emory. She is ordained in the American Baptist Churches USA.

Notes

- 1 The continued importance of religion was noted in the National Study of Youth and Religion, conducted by Christian Smith and others over the past 10 years. See Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 2 In particular I reflect on a recent study of *millennials* claiming to leave the church because of its stance on sexuality and homosexuality. See the *Huffington Post* article, “One-Third Of Millennials Who Left Their Religion Did It Because Of Anti-Gay Policies: Survey,” Feb. 26, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/millennials-gay-unaffiliated-church-religion_n_4856094.html.
Another important source is the Pew Foundation research on the “rise of nones.” See <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> released in 2012.
- 3 Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as Model for Biblical Education* (Fortress Press, 1982).

A new Pew Research Center study extensively profiles the Millennial generation of young adults now age 18-33.

They are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, burdened by debt, in no hurry to marry, connected by social media, racially diverse, distrustful of society yet hopeful about the future, the survey says.

Half of Millennials describe themselves as political independents and 29 percent claim no affiliation with any religion.

“These are at or near the highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation recorded for any generation in the quarter-century that the Pew Research Center has been polling on these topics,” the report says.

Some findings:

- 26 percent of this generation is married. This compares to 36 percent of Generation X when they were at this age, 48 percent of Baby Boomers, and 65 percent of the Silent Generation.
- Millennials view the Democrats more favorably than the Republicans. Millennials are more liberal on same-sex marriage, interracial marriage, and marijuana legalization. But on abortion and gun control, their views “are not much different from those of older adults,” the report says.
- They are more optimistic about America’s future: 49 percent say the country’s best years are ahead. This compares to 42 percent of Gen Xers and 44 percent of Boomers.
- 43 percent of Millennial adults are non-white, the highest share of any generation, the survey reports. This trend follows the wave of Hispanic and Asian immigrants in the U.S. over the last 50 years. Those immigrants’ U.S.-born children are now coming into adulthood, the report says.
- Statistically, Millennials enter adulthood with less trust in others: Only 19 percent say most people can be trusted. This compares with 31 percent of Gen Xers, 37 percent of Silents and 40 percent of Boomers.
“Their racial diversity may partly explain Millennials’ low levels of social trust,” the survey says. “A 2007 Pew Research Center analysis found that minorities and low-income adults had lower levels of social trust than other groups. Based on similar findings over many years from other surveys, sociologists have theorized that people who feel vulnerable or disadvantaged for whatever reason find it riskier to trust because they’re less well-fortified to deal with the consequences of misplaced trust.”

Source: “Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends,” Pew Research Center, March 2014. See <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>



Making Sense of Sacred Space:

An Interview with Maggi Dawn



Maggi Dawn is a liturgist, author, musician, theologian, a Church of England priest, and, since 2011, associate professor of theology and literature and dean of Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School. Her books include Like the Wideness of the Sea: Women Bishops and the Church of England (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2013) and The Accidental Pilgrim: New Journeys on Ancient Pathways (Hodder and Stoughton, 2011). Her 1996 recording Elements explores biblical images of God. In the liner notes she writes: "We live with a choice. We may opt for the safety of spiritual certainties, limiting the risk factors and never having too much of a spiritual crisis. Or we may go closer to the edge, and let our faith be turned upside down for the sake of a clearer revelation of God. But the revelation, in my experience, is of a bigger, kinder, more liberating God than I ever imagined possible."

REFLECTIONS: *What do you say to churches that worry about losing their young people?*

MAGGI DAWN: I think it's a mistake to get too hooked on certain questions. Churches ask, "How can we appeal to young people?" But let's remember that nothing appeals to all young people. They are all different one from another. So are people of any other age group. We have to ask ourselves better questions: Whom do we want to connect with in the space we've got? What are our strengths? Some churches invite people to sit on sofas in the worship space. It's a way of saying: "You can be yourself when you come here." Another church creates community around a dinner. Another will collaborate with local artists who transform the space and give people a whole new experience. What's important is the context of each congregation: What elements of culture should we use to reconnect people and the gospel? What makes the gospel approachable? Each church should focus on what it can do best.

REFLECTIONS: *We seem to be in the middle of a permanent cultural revolution built on technology, globalization, competing truths. What has changed most about churchgoing in recent decades?*

DAWN: One dramatic change is: Younger people now are far less willing to be told "this is how it is and you're supposed to accept it." In previous times, people were more willing to sit and listen. But consumer culture, self-help culture, the breakdown of religious authority all make it hard for the church to be seen as the only voice that is speaking truth.

The internet is having a level of impact as dramatic as that of the printing press. The scale of change is similar – anyone can publish anything, and anyone can reply. Every sort of music and language and image can move across the world. This means that everything we are experiencing in church we are seeing with different eyes.

At the time of the printing press, people were saying, Don't allow the common people to read!

It's too dangerous! It will cause revolution! People were terrified by that. We're hearing that same sort of fear now.

REFLECTIONS: *Should churches overhaul what they do?*

DAWN: I think it would be a disaster to transform church in order to please consumer society. The issue is how to present the gospel in ways that make sense to people. Church still does things the culture can't do. The gospel isn't religious self-help or therapy. It's a lot more exciting than that. There's poetry, singing, communal prayer, musicianship, art, communion – with centuries of practice to draw on. So perhaps we need to ask what is absolutely invaluable about church that you can't get on the internet or get from this culture.

Look at one of the great success stories of the last 50 years: Taizé. In a Taizé service, people sing simple songs over and over.^{***} It's solidly Christian worship, yet it works in the way a mantra does. It's a way of focusing the mind and the spirit. In Europe and increasingly in the U.S., it is popular especially with younger people. It works particularly well in the evening, a way of winding down, rather like a Compline service in a monastic community.

REFLECTIONS: *Should worship keep a particular aim in mind regardless of style or setting or cultural challenge?*

DAWN: Worship is, uniquely, about God and me and others. I can meet God in an art gallery or a library or even in my kitchen. But in those places I don't actively experience the presence of God *and others*. I don't mean to say God is more present here in the worship space than out there in the world, but when we are gathered together in worship we can focus on God in ways we can't do separately. At worship you place yourself in a community – and not just with people you like but with people who are not like you. It's as if we cannot fully engage with God – we can't get the full picture of God – unless we do it with others, including people who differ from us.

It's likely that there always will be different kinds of church, a multiplicity of worship styles. The worst thing to do is to line them up against each other. What matters is: Is the gospel being preached, and are people being reached?

^{***} *EDITOR'S NOTE: Located in France, the Taizé Community is dedicated to Christian reconciliation and peace. More than 100 monastic brothers, Catholic and Protestant from about 30 nations, take up ministries there, including hospitality to visitors and pilgrims. It is known for its liturgy of prayer and song, which has become a model for church services elsewhere. On the Taizé website, one practitioner writes: "Something very interesting at Taizé is that this formula of calming repetition has been taken up in the liturgy. ... Some young people who know almost nothing of mystery are introduced to it here, and they begin to learn how to pray."*

GRATITUDNI*

By Charles H. Harper

Something there is
in the human spirit –
a hunch, a wish,
a gleam of intuition
that whispers

there is more here
than meets the eye,
more than the mind
can comprehend
or words name,

a darkness and light,
a presence and absence
hidden – but shown
to some inner knowing
that knows better than we know,

that knows we are meant
to cry out our lament and praise,
our anger and thanksgiving
to the Nameless One
with many names.

So we do.
Amen

New World Order of Worship

Marquand Chapel has been described as the heart of Yale Divinity School. During the semester, it is host to a busy schedule of weekday worship services that feature liturgical diversity, world-music innovation, and traditional forms. It has a dual worship and educational purpose: It embodies the School's Christian worship values and also allows students to learn details of liturgical leadership. Each academic year a student team of chapel ministers is chosen to organize the worship programs, in collaboration with the chapel dean. Their duties include enlisting choirs, musicians, faculty, staff, and other students for services ranging from Lutheran vespers to Nigerian liturgies to Pentecostal praise to Catholic foot-washing. As the YDS website declares: "Marquand Chapel serves as a nexus of Christian spirit past, present, and future, giving students a glimpse of local liturgical possibility, a deeper sense of tradition, and an experience of world Christian solidarity." Reflections invited this year's four YDS chapel ministers to offer impressions about church and spirit, present and future.

Rolling Up Our Sleeves

By Katie McNeal



A palpable sense of foreboding fills many churches today. There is a fear of decline, especially in regards to the supposed exodus of young people from the church. Some meet this anxiety with blind optimism, some with bitter pessimism. However, I think the way forward is with a realistic hope and a readiness to roll up our sleeves for the demands ahead.

It is impossible to generalize about the church's current strengths and weaknesses. For every congregation doing good work in a field, there is another that is indifferent or counterproductive. However, these mixed results can be a good thing. As we continue to sharpen dialogues between churches, denominations, and seminaries, we can learn from each other's strengths and help each other grow out of our weaknesses. Through this mutually beneficial process, I believe the church will revitalize itself into a genuine, loving, worshipping 21st-century community.

But we're not there yet. I often wonder if the biggest hindrance comes from within. It is all too easy for us to get wrapped up in logistics and particulars; sometimes we see other churches as competitors instead of allies in learning. But I think a shift is occurring. I think we are slowly coming to focus on the one thing we can all agree upon: We are called to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors, fully.

Similarly, there is no one solution for the reported exodus of young people, which might be exaggerated. But before we blame contemporary trends and conditions, I encourage us to look at how we classify and treat young people at church. Do they have equal ownership with the older members? Or are they ignored or corralled into a separate worship experience? Younger people are not merely the abstract *future* of the church. They are the *current* church as much as older members are.

I am happy to report there are churches where high school students are welcomed on council, not as the token young people, but because they provide valuable insight into the mission of the church. I have seen congregations where all confirmed members are welcomed in the same Bible studies and discussion groups. I see an openness to create genuine and meaningful worship, whether through scripted liturgies of the denomination or unscripted experiences.

So I maintain a realistic hope. It will take imagination and creativity. There will be failures. There will be periods of stagnation. Yet through it all there is potential and promise for healing and revitalization. So let us roll up our sleeves and, together, as the Church, get to work.

I believe the church will revitalize itself into a genuine, loving, worshipping 21st-century community. But we're not there yet.

Katie McNeal '15 M.Div. is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She plans to work with congregations and the wider church on issues of vitality through traditional and creative methods.

Drinking from Many Wells

By Randall Spaulding



Most youth and young adults I talk to are candid about the great diversity of 21st-century worship. So much is on the table: disparate theologies, language, gender and sexuality concerns, a crowded menu of musical styles, the importance or unimportance of denominational identity, shrinking church attendance in the northern hemisphere. When it comes to worship, we are drinking from many wells.

Some might see this as chaos. But I am not discouraged.

Every day I witness young people seeking deeper relationships with one another and with God. They are insisting on authenticity in their worship experiences and in their connection to the faith community. With declines in denominational loyalty, young people are embracing the common ground that unites rather than characteristics that divide.

I see a healthy winnowing at work. Declining churches will need to adapt, grow leaner and healthier, or they will not survive. I do not hear young people lamenting this. The lament comes from an older generation comfortable with the status quo and nervous about disrupting it.

Despite the diversity and tensions of the worship scene, young people still seek unity in the Way of Jesus. Nevertheless, there's a clear need for worship that is relevant to 21st-century sensibilities. Young people are closely examining worship patterns and assumptions in order to renew, affirm, or if necessary reject them. They are looking for spiritually vibrant

worship expressions. They are insisting on intellectual integrity. Many are reclaiming ancient worship rituals. They're assessing God language, traditional gender boundaries, new discoveries in the sciences, and the adaptation of non-Christians rituals and practices for Christian worship.

Like the early church, we are living in an era of great political, economic, and religious instability and possibility. We could let our anxiety overwhelm us, make us afraid, and turn inward and defensive in our worship practices. But I trust in the adaptability of young people. I see them looking deeper, with eyes and hearts and minds that seek bridges, that seek the spirit of God in others, and find that we are walking the same journey in different ways in worship – the journey that is love, peace, kindness, helpfulness, healing, and hope. Our parents did not do church in the exact same way as their parents and grandparents. I expect nothing less from new generations of churchgoers. And that's good news.

Young people are examining worship patterns and assumptions in order to renew, affirm, or if necessary reject them. They are looking for spiritually vibrant worship expressions. They are insisting on intellectual integrity.

Randall Spaulding '14 M.Div. will begin a chaplain residency program at Yale-New Haven Hospital in the fall. He hopes to be ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister.

Music's the Thing

By Porsha Williams



As a young adult in ministry, I see a wave of younger people joining the church. I notice this occurring across several denominations. What is happening? I believe many young adults have the desire to feel connected, and at church they sense community and closeness. At worship they experience a level of personal intimacy. I see an increase in the number of young adults entering ministry, either directly after undergrad or only a few years removed.

Many young adults are coming to church with a burning passion and desire. And for many churches, this is a challenge – the challenge of understanding that fire and passion. In essence, there is a generational gap. More churches should consider creating a staff position for young adult ministry to nurture the numbers of young adults in

Many young adults are coming to church with a burning passion and desire. And for many churches, this is a challenge.



their midst. Some traditions are essential, but congregations could find ways to bring newness to them. Some popular traditional hymns could be placed in newer musical settings or arranged to provide a contemporary feel.

To me, music is central. It's the thing that brings me closer to God in worship. I first encountered the Holy Spirit as a young child, and the encounter happened through the music and the voices of a choir. Music is an art that transcends time, culture, and generations. I honestly believe that music during worship can bring people together. I have seen generations of people unite through music in the worship space. When we raise our voices to God in song, all on one accord, we become one voice in the spirit.

Churches bring a particular strength to 21st-century culture – the power of prophetic witness. With so many injustices in the world, many younger people are looking to the church for an answer, a protest of conscience. With pastors preaching the Gospel of Jesus as well as the texts of the prophets, my hope is a prophetic movement will gather that mobilizes the attention of young adults. May the church become the church that Christ desired us to become.

Originally from Bridgeport, CT., Porsha Williams '15 M.Div. plans to pursue an S.T.M. degree, doctoral studies, and ordination in the Baptist tradition.

The Widening Search

By Joe Brewer



People's ideas of spiritual communities are changing. In previous decades, churchgoers would belong to a particular denomination and congregation. Worshipers now – especially those about 45 and younger – tend to search for a particular experience that speaks to them. They may not know what they're looking for – they'll "know when they find it" – but the search continues until they think their spiritual needs are met.

These needs might touch on any number of things. Some yearn for a better connection with God. Others long to reconnect with their childhood religious experiences. Some are looking for spiritual peace. Some left the church years ago and now want to recommit to Christ in a more inclusive, modern environment.

If the searchers are a couple or a family, they might keep looking until they find a worship experience that touches the entire family. That can be a lot of moves.

Once they find a congregational home, they might not stay there forever. In a mobile and highly consumer culture, people will remain as long as they feel welcome and happy and fed spiritually. When there is community conflict, people are not as eager to stay and work through it. They may simply look for a new place to worship. As leaders, we need to understand this new dynamic and provide support. The most disheartening result of a conflict is not when we lose a member to another congregation but when a Christian loses faith entirely over the matter.

As searchers, people might belong to multiple spiritual communities. Again, this is the inevitable result of consumer options and expectations, an expansion of available worship styles. I know people who go to Sunday services at one church, mid-week Taizé for prayer and reflection at another, and Saturday centering prayer at another.

I think this is all a good thing! It means people's spiritual needs are being fed. As a future pastor, I don't think it means my congregations have to be everything to everyone. I need to be secure in the fact that I may be sharing members with other congregations. I need to stay alert to a person's or family's changing spiritual needs.

The goal is to bring people closer to Christ. I believe healthy ministers and congregations realize that they themselves might not be able to fulfill that goal entirely for every person. The world of this spiritual search is bigger now than it used to be.

When there is community conflict, people are not as eager to stay and work through it. They may simply look for another place to worship.

Joe Brewer, a second-year M.Div., has 20 years' experience in the private sector as a management consultant and comes to Yale from New York City. A Lutheran, he hopes to become ordained and work in urban parish ministry.

Back then I was going steady
 with fog, who could dance
 like no one's business, I threw her over
 for a leaf that one day fluttered
 first her shadow then her whole life
 into my hand, that's a lot
 of responsibility and a lot
 of relatives, this leaf
 and that leaf and all the other leaves
 hung around, I told her
 I needed space, which was true,
 without it, I'd only be a soul
 and no one's sure that wisp
 is real, that's why we say
 of real estate *location, location,*
location, and of speech,
locution, locution, locution,
 and of love, *yes, yes, yes,*
 I am on my knees, will you have me,
 world?



Exile's Song: Welcome to the Post-Establishment Church

By Stephanie Spellers

In the first chapter of Good News in Exile, Martin Copenhaver offers this provocative statement, equal parts lament and hope:

Today the world is different from the one into which I was born, and today's church is different from the one in which I was baptized. ... The "kingdom" of American liberal Protestantism no longer exists. We are not in charge anymore, if we ever really were in charge. ... I have come to believe that for liberal Protestants there is no returning to another time and circumstance when we seemed to be in charge, and that there are ways in which we can welcome these changes, as unsettling as they may be. That is, I am convinced that there is good news in exile.

... The future beckons us into a wonderful new world, the outlines of which are only now coming into focus. But it is a vision we can see only if we cease to expect that the future will look just like the past.¹

Copenhaver's words capture a reality that millions of mainline Protestants share. Like our exiled forebears in Babylon, today's churches are now trying desperately to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.

As the Canon for Missional Vitality in the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, my vocation is to be a companion to leaders who are navigating this strange land – the multicultural, multi-faceted, often secular neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island. It's a cultural landscape quite different from the one where most came to understand being Christian.

Good News in Exile helped me to name that experience of disorientation and the challenge before us. But the book also gave me pause. Looking at the copyright – 1998 – I realized just how long we have been caught in this spiral.

I also realized, with a shock, that the book was published the same year I was baptized. That means

the church in exile is the only church I have ever known. And that strange land of which we speak, where the church is on the margins and exile is the norm, is actually my home. In this reflection, I seek to offer a word of welcome to the churches as they sing the Lord's song in a land that is strange but also quite beautiful. It is a gift to be here, in exile.

God Undeterred

I grew up in the South in the 1970s and 1980s, in a black family that somehow dodged deep commitment to Christian faith. I majored in religion at Wake Forest University, a Southern Baptist school in North Carolina, but dodged classes on Christianity. I even earned a divinity degree at Harvard, but dodged the big questions on my own faith.

Of course, God would not be deterred. A friend was teaching Sunday school at a poor, mostly black Lutheran church in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood. He asked if I would help him with the kids. I asked if we could go to brunch afterward as well. He said yes. And thus began my delayed sojourn into Christian community.

It was at that church, in 1998, that I was baptized. Resurrection Lutheran was a ragtag community with a part-time pastor who loved Jesus so much you

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were a little embarrassed to look at him. It had a faded red door and an organ so decrepit they often ditched it and rocked the electronic keyboard instead.

It was a tiny church with a huge heart for a neighborhood filled with the city's most broken people: foster children, gaunt HIV-positive men, crack addicts staying clean one day at a time. They weren't just near the church or served by the church – they were the church. Most of the white folks had left for the suburbs years ago. Most of the people with money felt too nervous or too guilty to show up in Roxbury. It was just us: mainline liturgical Christians in exile.

Singing With Mary

It was my first church home ever, and it was glorious. I look back and wonder why. Why that church with its crumbling walls and broken people? Why that moment when Protestants were weeping and despairing of all they had lost? And I think I know.

I was not drawn by the hope of established privilege or perfectly executed liturgy. If anything, it was the opposite. I heard this powerful little church singing the Lord's song as the prophet Mary, Jesus' mother, had proclaimed it before them. They sang

We need to take the time to grieve. Even as we wipe away tears, we need to look around. Our churches could make a home here in this new land.

of a God who is turning the world around, a mighty God who is using poor people and bleeding women and illiterate fishermen and mighty ones who have fallen a long way down and single mothers in backwater towns with bellies bursting with the life of the Spirit. They sang about a God who used all these castoffs and outcasts and exiles to embrace and turn the world.

Nothing had ever sounded so sweet to my ears, and nothing has since. It is the good news, and it takes on special poignancy and urgency when you sing it in exile.

As a church leader, I also recognize the grief of Israel, the psalms of loss, despair, even anger. No one asked to go to Babylon. No one asked to lose all they had known. I see why they feared this was God's judgment, or worse, God abandoning them altogether.

The World Has Turned

Our exile is not a judgment – not from God, not from me. There is no reason to demonize or dismiss conventional models of church and those who continue to meet God in them. But the call has become more complicated. The world has turned. We are not

in that land anymore. I will tenderly hold those who miss the comfort, predictability, and status of an established church, the way Israel missed its temple. I am sorry for everyone who thought you only needed good preaching, good music, good pastoral care, and a good outreach team, and the people would flock. But we are not in that land anymore.

This is a real loss, and we need to take the time to grieve. Even as we wipe away tears, we need to look around. Our churches could make a home here in this new land. We could welcome this new reality – new languages and cultures, different faiths side by side, a church on the margins – and discover here great blessing, beauty, and wisdom. We could sing the Lord's song as we never have before, here in this land. And we would find plenty of people who long to sing it with their whole hearts too.

Forging those relationships with our neighbors, the church in exile will have to take up new practices, the kind that the established paradigm did not require. Mainline Protestants will have to cultivate what Bishop Mary Glasspool of the Diocese of Los Angeles calls "cultural humility" – being humble and curious about the gifts of the communities around us, rather than trying to master and dominate them.

We will have to show up in strange lands and ask those who know the terrain to show what they have found beautiful, where they have also met God. And we will have to learn to sing the song of good news in exile with them, most likely in a new key.

What I know in my bones is this: It is a gift to be here in this strange land. You could weep or you could sing. I hope that, when morning comes, we hear you singing.

The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers oversees new and redeveloping congregations in the Diocese of Long Island. She is also author of Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other, and the Spirit of Transformation (Church Publishing, 2006) and co-author of the upcoming The Episcopal Way (volume one of the Church's Teachings for a Changing World series), which will be published by Morehouse this fall.

Notes

- 1 Martin Copenhaver, William Willimon, and Anthony Robinson, *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church* (Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 6, 7-8.

SPEAKING DOUBTS AND CONVICTIONS

An Interview with Chris Stedman



Chris Stedman is a 27-year-old atheist who is committed to the well-being of nonreligious people and to interfaith collaboration. He recently became Coordinator of Humanist Life for the Yale Humanist Community. He consults with the Open

Party, a YDS organization for non-Christian or non-traditional Christian YDS students.

*Stedman's 2013 book, *Faitheist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* (Beacon Press), tells of his embrace of atheism after a period as an evangelical Christian. The book includes his perspective as a gay teenager who was rejected by church – also his search for values of empathy, religious diversity, and social change.*

He has a B.A. in religion from Augsburg College and an M.A. in religion (pastoral care and counseling) from Meadville Lombard Theological School at the University of Chicago. Most recently he has been a humanist chaplain at Harvard, one of only five universities that have such chaplaincies.

REFLECTIONS: *Who gathers at the Yale Humanist Community?*

STEDMAN: It's a mixed group of students who self-describe in a variety of ways – humanists, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, seekers, spiritual-but-not-religious. People are perhaps freer in today's climate to speak openly about their doubts and convictions without having to worry about their safety or about social stigma. But there's no barrier to entry in the Humanist Community based on belief or nonbelief. We want to be a resource to theists and nontheists alike.

REFLECTIONS: *What is your role?*

STEDMAN: My aim is to open up a safe space where students can explore what they believe, learn about new ideas, act on their values, and listen to what their lives are telling them. But it's never my job to tell a student what he or she should believe, and I work with students of all religious backgrounds.

REFLECTIONS: *Does a rising indifference to religious affiliation signal a new surge of religious skepticism?*

STEDMAN: Young people are growing up in a world where so many things are vying for their attention. They're bombarded. There's pressure to be constantly connected. The result is: So many of these connections can be shallow and dissatisfying. I think there's a great hunger to have conversations about what it means to be a reflective individual, especially when some of the institutions that have traditionally invited them to do so aren't working for them. The Humanist Community hopes to create a space

where students are invited to slow down, pause, reflect, relate with another person one-on-one on matters of importance.

REFLECTIONS: *What do students come to you to talk about?*

STEDMAN: It's not unusual for a student to come in to talk about her or his struggle with a philosophical or ethical question. Some students struggle with how to tell their family that they don't believe in God anymore – how to start a positive conversation with their families about why they feel that way, and how they can maintain an appreciation for one another despite these differences.

REFLECTIONS: *Are they redefining what community means?*

STEDMAN: Millennials are conceiving of community in new ways, and I think the rise of social media can positively contribute to our understanding of how communities form and function. But there's a temptation to think that online community alone can replicate the experience of a physical community. It is important to find a balance.

REFLECTIONS: *Why are interfaith connections important to you?*

STEDMAN: It's been said that America is now the most religiously diverse society in the history of the world. Yet religious literacy is abysmal, particularly knowledge of others' traditions. So I think one aim of the Humanist Community should be to improve relations between believers and nonbelievers. It's vitally important to have conversations with people who believe differently from oneself. For one thing, it challenges people to articulate what it is they believe to those who probably do not share in their beliefs.

REFLECTIONS: *What's the biggest misconception about atheists?*

STEDMAN: I get to name just one? Okay: The biggest misconception is that being an atheist means being a nihilist, that a life of meaning is impossible if you don't believe in God. It's insulting to hear you can't be a good person without theistic belief. It's insulting not only to the many atheists I know who do live exemplary lives but to theists too, because it suggests they live compassionate lives only out of fear of God's retribution. And I know that's not the case.

Even if our sources of inspiration are different, there's an important point of contact between believers and nonbelievers: helping others. It's the human project to cultivate compassion and meaning. It's truly up to us to work together to solve our problems.

The Search for a Grown-Up Youth Culture

By Melanie Ross

*Several years ago, I studied a large evangelical congregation that had recently finished reading the book *unChristian* by David Kinnaman.¹ The book's premise was simple and disturbing: Something has gone terribly wrong with modern Christianity.*

The book's three-year study of individuals between the ages of 19-35 – adults who had spent their formative childhood and adolescent years inside the church – overwhelmingly indicated that they now perceived Christians to be judgmental, hypocritical, and too political. The church's senior pastor summarized matters this way:

Most young adults who look at American Christianity are not impressed. They look at the music and say, "They're trying to be contemporary, but this is kind of hokey." They have a bias against anything that looks presentational and slick, anything that's too "programmed." They look at the church and say, "What I mostly see are people who are interested in being successful, having enough money, and living the American dream, all the while baptizing their American dream in Christian language." The evangelical church ought to be big enough to own these criticisms, to say "You're right." We have to admit it, address it, confess it, and work against it."

On the whole, those in the congregation shared their pastor's convictions, but were unsure how to respond. The congregation was well aware that a younger generation – disillusioned by mall-like environments and worship that tries too hard to be "relevant" – is leaving evangelicalism in unprecedented numbers. One senior member confided to me, "I feel a struggle right now, both personally and in our church community, about how to reach churchgoers of the 20/30-something generation."

The problems facing this evangelical congregation (and thousands like it across the country) are not new. In his landmark study, *When God Shows*

Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America, Mark Senter points out that the concept of "youth ministry" as we know it today is a late addition to the work of the church: "The stories of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Menno Simmons, and John Wesley are nearly exclusively the stories of adults. Not until the late 18th century is there a concerted effort to minister to young people within the context of the church."²

Era of Angst

The history can only be sketched here in the broadest terms. During the 1800s, a process of secularization began to chip away at the influence that church and home had previously exerted over young people. The 1859 publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, then the 1925 Scopes trial that allowed

Evangelicals recreated old-time religion in the trappings of youth counterculture, and inaugurated a new "juvenilized" version of Christianity.

the teaching of evolution in public schools, caused fundamentalists great angst. Gradually, religious and moral influences, including the teaching of the Bible, were excluded from public schools. The Great Depression shook Americans' confidence in their economic system.

The traumas of World War II and the Cold War quickly followed, and people began to speak of a "crisis in civilization." Since Hitler had risen to power with the help of a fanatical youth movement, American adults feared that their unemployed, idealistic youth could be just as easily manipulated by

communists or fascists. Parents had reason to fear that their children might see the end of economic prosperity, democracy, and religious freedom. Young people seemed to be especially vulnerable victims of the times, and leaders from both inside and outside the churches began to proclaim that youth held the key to saving civilization. Evangelicals began calling for the mass evangelization of young people as a means of saving the world from destruction.

Saviors of Civilization?

A new generation of evangelicals hoped to meet the challenge with an organization called Youth for Christ (YFC), which rose to national prominence through wildly popular Saturday night youth rallies. The peak years of the YFC rallies came between 1944 and 1950, and continued strongly in many places through the 1950s. In historian Joel Carpenter's description, these meetings "featured carefully orchestrated visions of innocence, heroism, and loyalty to a global cause, all wrapped in a contemporary idiom borrowed from radio variety shows and patriotic musical reviews."³

A Saturday night YFC rally typically featured a live radio broadcast, upbeat music that mimicked the big-band styles of the day, brief testimonies by recent converts, and short, fervent sermons tied to current events.

In the quest for excitement and entertainment, many rallies got caught up in novelty. The most outlandish attraction was a gospel horse who "moved his jaws to show 'how the girls in the choir chew gum' and demonstrated his knowledge of the Bible by tapping his hoof three times when asked 'how many Persons are in the Trinity?'"⁴ Opponents criticized the movement for selling out to worldliness and cheapening the faith with gimmicks. Youth for Christ leaders responded that the fate of the world depended upon winning as many youthful converts as possible, by any means necessary. Furthermore, since YFC rallies were not church services, it was fine for them to be entertaining.

Son City

Rally-style Christianity migrated from the stadium to the sanctuary in the early 1970s, when David Holmbo, the youth minister and associate music minister at South Park Church in Park Ridge, IL., and his friend Bill Hybels reinvented youth ministry. Son City, as their program came to be called, was designed to reach unchurched teenagers for Christ. Services were held on Tuesday nights at the church and used every method associated with early YFC rallies – multimedia, contemporary music, skits,

relevant preaching – with a distinctively 70s flair. In three years, attendance increased to more than 1,000 youth.

Encouraged by this response, the leadership of Son City decided to implement the same principles on an adult level. Willow Creek Community Church was born. Within two years, services grew from 125 to 2,000 people. In later decades, attendance would swell to more than 17,000, and for the next 30 years, evangelical congregations across the country would imitate the megachurch's marketing and evangelism strategies. American evangelicals recreated old-time religion in the trappings of youth counterculture, and in so doing inaugurated a new "juvenilized" version of Christianity.⁵

Juvenilization for Jesus

Juvenilization is a two-edged sword. On one hand, it has kept American evangelical Christianity vibrant. Megachurches reach thousands of individuals with informal, entertaining, fast-paced worship experience set to upbeat contemporary music.

At the same time, it has pushed evangelical congregations like the one cited at the beginning of this article to ask new and difficult ecclesiological questions. Should we start with the most effective means of evangelism possible, and then create worship that is congruent with this process, or should we begin with a liturgical standard in place and evangelize

Leaders from inside and outside the churches began to proclaim that youth held the key to saving civilization.

with language that upholds the standard and leads people to it?⁶ Have we grossly overestimated what is possible in a 75-minute format of worship, while tragically underestimating what we're doing in a 20-year format of teaching and discipleship?⁷

It is impossible to predict what worship will look like in 20 years' time. But the evangelical churches I study continually surprise and delight me as they challenge a new generation to strive for deeper maturity. I conclude with the words of one senior pastor:

Modern church work sometimes feels like the work of producing programs for religious consumers. Sermons can become commodities that people consume and criticize. Children's ministries can become producers of sports programs and education programs and music programs. Youth ministry can slide into entertainment. But what do you want people

to say when they look at our church? Do you want them to say, "Wow! Look at that incredible building! Check out their children's ministry, their youth ministry, their music!" Or do you want them to say, "You know, there is something about the *people* in that church. The quality of their lives; the depth of their relationships; the way they seem to know God. I have to hear more about this Jesus they keep talking about"?

Herein lies a timely reminder for every generation.

Melanie Ross '04 M.A.R., '07 M.Div., assistant professor of liturgical studies, joined the YDS faculty in 2012. She has also taught at Notre Dame, Saint John's School of Theology, and Huntington University. Her upcoming book this year is called *Evangelical vs. Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy* (Eerdmans). She co-edited the 2010 book *The Serious Business of Worship: Essays in Honour of Bryan D. Spinks* (T&T Clark).

Notes

- 1 David Kinnaman, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* (Baker Books, 2007).
- 2 Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Baker Academic, 2010), p. 76.
- 3 Joel A. Carpenter, "Youth for Christ and the New Evangelicals' Place in the Life of the Nation," in *American Recoveries: Religion in the Life of the Nation*, edited by Sherrill Rowland (University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 135.
- 4 Bruce Shelley, "The Rise of Evangelical Youth Movements," *Fides et Historia* 18.1 (1986), pp. 47-63.
- 5 Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2012).
- 6 Todd E. Johnson, "Disconnected Rituals," in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen*, edited by Todd E. Johnson (Brazos, 2002), p. 66.
- 7 "What Kind of People Are We Forming With Our Worship? An Interview with Isaac Wardell," *Resurgence*. Sept 1, 2013. <http://theresurgence.com/2011/03/10/what-kind-of-people-are-we-forming-with-our-worship>.

Ancient One,
before the Big Bang,
eternal, always, forever –

New One,
re-inventing
in every generation,

coming to newness
in each of us
now,

our forbearers
gave you many names,
each too limiting

to encompass
your infinite mystery.
Forsaking all names,

or perhaps embracing
the cacophony of every
name, we come

into your presence
with thanksgiving
for our lives

and all that sustains us
through the joys and perils
of this mortal journey.

Amen.

* Mayan for "gratitude"



EMBRACING THE REDEMPTION: An interview with J. Lawrence Turner



The Rev. J. Lawrence Turner '06 M.Div. is the 32-year-old senior pastor of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Memphis, TN. He became the 5,000-member congregation's minister last year

after serving seven years at Community Baptist Church in New Haven, CT.

Turner is a native of Nashville, TN., a graduate of Fisk University (magna cum laude, B.A. in religion and philosophy). At YDS, he was president of the student council and the Yale Black Seminars, a fellow of the Fund for Theological Education, and a recipient of the H.H. Tweedy Prize for exceptional promise for pastoral leadership. He is pursuing a D.Min. degree in Transformative Leadership at the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, NY.

REFLECTIONS: *Is the spiritual quest different today than it was for previous generations?*

J. LAWRENCE TURNER: Twenty years ago, young people were questioning structural issues, institutions, and authorities, challenging modes of ministry. Today the question – the quest – goes deeper: Why do I need to be a Christian at all? Why do I need belief? In an age of skepticism, it's not assumed that you'll go to church the way your parents did. A lot of churches are having a hard time figuring out how to articulate the faith and defend it in these times.

Our church makes clear statements of faith. My challenge is to translate them to the 21st-century demographic – through teaching, preaching, art, sound bites, and social media.

REFLECTIONS: *Are contemporary conditions changing the way people form spiritual community?*

TURNER: People aren't automatically going to meet as they traditionally did – before church on Sunday morning and at mid-week. As the rule of thumb has it, the larger you get, the smaller you have to become. It's important to hold people together who are experiencing life together. We have young-people small groups, and they love it. It might be on a week night at an apartment or a coffee shop. They love the flexibility about the way they meet. They are discovering that these ways of deepening faith and sharing with other people aren't just the thing to do – they make your life better.

REFLECTIONS: *Are churches rethinking their approaches to spiritual formation?*

TURNER: I see people at our church embracing the idea of discipleship, accepting the challenge to embody the lifestyle of a disciple of Christ. This means focusing on prayer. Fellowship with believers.

Spending time with the Master. Authentic worship. Mission. These involve practical action.

REFLECTIONS: *Maybe people trust action more than talk now.*

TURNER: People want to *embody* Christ in their lives. It's not just logos but ethos. Character compels belief. And they want to see that in church leadership as well as in their own church participation – live out the ideals of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoners.

In his book *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Fortress, 2007), Robert M. Franklin warns that churches are in a crisis of mission. That's something we want to address. What engages young people is the effort to put themselves in a position to make a tangible difference.

Our church is adopting two zip codes locally with a commitment to beautification and neighborhood economic renewal. We just sent our first all-millennial mission team to Guatemala. It was a fact-finding trip. They visited schools and churches. They learned about health concerns, the nutritional problems of children. They were transformed by what they saw. They have plans to go back. They want to be of help.

REFLECTIONS: *You've mentioned authenticity. How does that translate at church?*

TURNER: We script what should happen at worship. We work hard at it. We have meetings about it all week. Yet young people aren't so concerned with form and structure. They want to experience God in a real way. They're not looking for perfection from the church but transparency and honesty – "Don't lie to me. Tell me the truth."

Intergenerational dialogue needs to happen. The older generation can't be hypocritical, but they can relate to younger people and tell them: "I've been where you've been and I've made mistakes, but I too have experienced the glory of God."

REFLECTIONS: *What makes you hopeful?*

TURNER: There's much discussion about the world of social media and how it can consume one's life. But I have faith in people that ultimately they'll disengage and be open to what they really need. That's what the church has always been – countercultural. Here at our church they're hearing the gospel, but they're also hearing a challenge to make sacrifices toward a better life. They're embracing the redemption that gives grace.

Abundant Life: Defying Powerlessness

By John Helmiere

It was the first time I had ever seen security guards posted in front of the Bank of America in my south Seattle neighborhood. Apparently they knew we were coming. It was Holy Week of 2011 and Valley & Mountain Fellowship, the church that had started six months earlier in my living room, was about to inaugurate “Holy Table Turning Monday.”

Though the descriptive name we chose for this new holiday felt verbose, we hoped to avoid the confusion that accompanies a designation like Maundy Thursday. The median age of our congregation is about 30, and nearly half have little or no experience with church. So we are naive and brazen enough to attempt to correct the church’s historic neglect to set aside a day of remembrance for Jesus turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. We believe his action in the Temple was a pivotal part of the Holy Week narrative along with the Triumphal Entry, Last Supper, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.

Marching Past Security

On this cool April afternoon we gathered outside the closest Bank of America, marched past the security guards, and demanded an audience with the manager. We presented a letter of grievances that included the bank’s role in the mortgage crisis and its financing of mountaintop removal and rainforest clear-cutting projects.

We closed personal checking accounts and returned outside to hand out fliers that described neighborhood credit unions and a local community bank that supports socially and environmentally responsible enterprises. The fliers also explained why we were there.

The Gospel of Mark explicitly puts the Temple action on the Monday between Palm Sunday and Easter. At Valley & Mountain, we interpret the turning of the tables as the trigger that led the Roman authorities to arrest, torture, and execute Jesus.

The Cross was an instrument reserved for insurrectionists: those who would defy established authorities. Jesus’ action at the Temple shined a light on the oppression that took place at this nexus of religious and political power. Debt and tax records, the instruments of debt enslavement and funding for the Roman military, were kept in the Temple. His action intended to subvert a debilitating social experience – powerlessness – and show people a new way to freedom.

Four Anxieties

Amidst the countless blogs, books, and conferences offering guidance to church planters, no resource has proven more helpful to my work of engaging young people outside the traditional church’s sphere of influence than Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* (Yale, 1952). In this work, Tillich describes three

Institutions are presumed to be corrupt, and young people are finding their own wellsprings of meaning that require no approval from authorities for their value.

core anxieties at the heart of human behavior that religion must address – death, condemnation, and meaninglessness. His framework has helped me understand much of the interior struggle that besieges the young adults I serve in their search for abundant life. Yet among them I have witnessed an existential challenge that Tillich did not describe and which the church should confront: the anxiety of powerlessness.

This is not to dismiss the presence of the other three anxieties in my generation. Anxiety of death is at the heart of all human behavior, but it is buried deep in the subconscious of people my age. It is now being altered in a historically novel way by the emergence of genuinely conceivable, non-metaphorical, non-spiritual efforts to conquer death by socio-technological juggernauts like Google. Even the whisper of possibility that we may be able to download our psyches into new bodies or trans-physical networks is fundamentally changing how the anxiety of death is felt by my generation.

The anxiety of condemnation, traditionally manifested as the fear of hell, is not a vivid force in the world I inhabit. However, the possibility that we are condemned to a hellish environmental Armageddon is a widespread worry. This is rooted less in an experience of personal unworthiness than in an individual ineffectiveness to stave off the collapse of earth's life-supporting systems.

When I got started with church planting, I assumed meaninglessness would be the primary existential struggle I'd encounter. I was wrong. In Tillich's day, the public loss of confidence in traditional institutions and religious authorities triggered a crisis of identity and orientation. My generation is not troubled, much less existentially terrified, by a perceived lack of institutional trustworthiness. Governmental, religious, educational, media, and corporate bodies are presumed to be corrupt, and young people are finding their own deep wellsprings of meaning that require no sanction and approval from authorities for their value.

Crisis of Powerlessness

We experience meaning in friendships and community, in creative and collaborative endeavors, in social entrepreneurship, in living passionately and contributing something to the world. We do not lack for meaning. We lack for strategies that protect and promote what we know is meaningful. My generation does not ask, "Does anything matter?" We ask, "Does anything I do matter?"

Various Christianities are addressing this crisis of powerlessness in their own familiar ways. Popular Neocalvinist congregations provide a swift and psychologically satisfying answer. They promote a monarchic theology confirming our fear that we have no power to produce change. God is sovereign and nothing you do makes a difference, so just toe the line until you die and be grateful you've been elected to go to heaven.

The charismatic movement offers another response. A feeling of powerlessness is channeled into

a drive toward individual transformation through miraculous healings and exorcisms. It is also funneled into prophetic participation in the "unleashing" of the Spirit's redeeming power into the public sphere.

Neither of these approaches is especially well suited to a congregation informed by the eco-feminist, mystical, and liberationist Christian traditions that we embrace. My work at Valley & Mountain has largely been an effort to enact an ecclesiology rooted in these traditions in order to address this formidable experience of many in my generation, the existential anxiety of powerlessness.

Creative Liberation

It has been almost three years since our first celebration of Holy Table Turning Monday. Since then Valley & Mountain has devised other approaches to resist oppressive structures and generate loving alternatives. We call it "creative liberation."

A previous generation did the hard work of questioning dominant culture systems and values. However, acts of questioning and critiquing no longer pose the radical challenge they once did. Our

My generation does not ask, "Does anything matter?" We ask, "Does anything I do matter?"

generational calling is to find more potent strategies for confronting contemporary powerlessness. Otherwise, we experience the same helplessness that the Israelites knew when they gained liberation from Egypt and found themselves in the desert asking: What are we supposed to do now?

At Valley & Mountain, we have co-founded a new center for creative liberation work, focusing on eco-ecclesiology. Over the past year we have worked with an organization called Community Arts Create and many neighborhood volunteers to transform a dilapidated building and vacant lot into an "incubator for community and social change." We call it the Collaboratory and it includes several spaces:

- Mixing Chamber, a multi-purpose room that hosts a drop-in center offering hot meals and companionship, free yoga classes, arts programs, musician jam sessions, dances, and our worship services.
- Coworking Office, an open-seating cooperative workspace for small organizations and individuals.
- Learning Kitchen, which hosts nutrition and culinary programs and community meal preparation.
- Park & Garden, a public green space that includes

the Learning Kitchen's urban farm, gathering places, performance space, public art and freewalls, and a chicken coop for the neighborhood's retired laying hens.

Eco-ecclesiology combines the hyper-local focus of parish theology, or place-based ecclesiology, with an ecological-systems view of a neighborhood. The church is not seen as a divine institution acting upon a profane culture and place but as one manifestation of the Holy Spirit's liberating, creative, communifying activity in a given location. We are no longer an institution imposing itself on a place to redeem, direct, or inform it. Rather, we are an evolving organism that exists interdependently within a habitat. Our explicit evolutionary *telos* is toward God's *shalom*.

Spirit and Subversion

Eco-ecclesiology subverts the myths of individualism and exceptionalism that pervade American public discourse and that shape the experience of privileged young people who repeatedly hear the message "you can and will save the world." Eco-ecclesiology replaces competition with collaboration. It substitutes the impulse of intervention with the practice of companionship. The uneasy scaffolding of the lone ego is exposed and may begin to yield to a sense of belonging, grace, and collaborative identity. The work of courageously confronting the anxiety of powerlessness can begin.

Another element that addresses this anxiety is through our participatory and co-creative worship. Today's entertainment, media, education, and advertising sectors have developed highly interactive formats that appeal to a generation yearning for power through participation. Yet so many churches continue to worship through scripted performances and liturgies designed for passive spectators by outside agents. At Valley & Mountain we aim to provide just enough structure to empower participants to co-create the worship experience as a community.

The weekly celebration takes place in three movements, each lasting about 30 minutes. The first includes a congregational song, quiet time for prayer, a short reflection that ends with questions, then communal reflection on what was said, followed by an opportunity to participate in community life through offering money and time.

For the second movement, we silently break into spiritual practice groups. These Encounter Groups, so called because they suggest different ways to encounter the Spirit, are always a mix of contemplative, artistic, and activist practices – such as poetry writing, yoga, prayer circles, Zen sits, *lectio divina*,

and creative liberation action planning sessions. The first Encounter Group to finish their practice gathers around the Table and sings a song calling the other groups to join them. When all are present, we consecrate the meal.

This Eucharistic Love Feast, a full meal that we share around tables, is our third movement. We end with community announcements – usually invita-

The church is not seen as a divine institution acting upon a profane culture, but one manifestation of the Holy Spirit's liberating activity.

tions to upcoming musical performances, birthday parties, and political demonstrations – and a benediction.

The traditional view regards liturgy as an experience of faith formation. Similarly, I believe the practice of co-creative, liberated worship can and must undergird the work of the Body of Christ in this era of powerlessness.

As we approach our fourth year of celebrating Holy Table Turning Monday, we are now reaching out to other communities who are interested in collaborative Christian responses to the anxiety of powerlessness in the face of interlocking structures of oppression.

We do not presume to save the church or the world through a day of creative liberation, a community center, or innovative worship services. But we do hope to inspire others to extract themselves from mainstream anxieties and embrace the economic-ecological call of the gospel and the abundant life it promises.

The Rev. John Helmiere '10 M.Div. is the convener of Valley & Mountain Fellowship (United Methodist Church) and co-founder of the Collaboratory, a social change incubator in Seattle. Learn more about Valley & Mountain's work, including Holy Table Turning Monday, by visiting www.valleyandmountain.org.

A GENERATION'S SHOWDOWN WITH TRUTH:

An Interview with Michael Wear



Michael Wear, 25, is a writer, speaker, and consultant who worked in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships during President Obama's first term.

There, he led evangelical outreach and helped manage the administration's engagement on religious and values issues, including adoption and anti-human trafficking efforts. He also led faith outreach for Obama's re-election campaign. He writes for The Atlantic, OnFaith, Relevant Magazine, and other outlets on faith, politics, and culture. Wear attends a nondenominational church in Washington, D.C.

REFLECTIONS: *A new Pew survey says the Millennial generation (now age 18-33) is low on social trust, political affiliation, and environmentalism but high on optimism about the future. Are the signals mixed? How do you sort it out?*

MICHAEL WEAR: One should be cautious about making generalizations about any group, but my general perception is that this generation is drawn to lofty aspirations but resistant to concentrated power and exclusive commitments and judgments. They're hesitant to close off options whether on theological or lifestyle issues. This influences many facets of their life: their careers, their relationships, their faith. And these dual trends — high, global aspirations, and a hesitancy to make exclusive commitments — are in tension with one another.

REFLECTIONS: *How will this affect the church world?*

WEAR: We're seeing a healthy skepticism of tradition for its own sake, and a reassessment of religious assumptions that previous generations took for granted. The flip side is: At a time of sweeping reassessment, many Millennials are unsure where and how to draw the line at all.

REFLECTIONS: *Should church leaders be worried?*

WEAR: This should be a time for rigorous thinking from church leaders. Looking to the older generation of ministers, we need their leadership to help us find out what's essential to belief and what we should hold to. But I think they need to do some self-reflection about some of the things they held to be essential that perhaps were not essential after all. We're in an American moment of skepticism and cynicism. Americans, including young Americans, can sniff out ulterior motives and self-serving arguments.

Yet Christians can stand upright under inquiry because the best Christian thought is only interested in what is true. Therefore, we should not be afraid of

well-intentioned, vigorous examination. And when our leaders welcome those kinds of discussions, it resonates with a generation craving authenticity. The question is: Can we look to our leaders to be honest and work out their faith in the real world — a faith that seeks to be coherent?

REFLECTIONS: *Is the definition of religion up for grabs?*

WEAR: Young people do want to make a difference in the world. They have an incredible capacity for empathy. But society's definition of religious is no longer a given. In the old days, even if you didn't go to church, the culture was religious, so you learned what society's definition of religion was. The church has to realize that Americans are no longer learning by osmosis what it means to be religious. What is essential? What is orthodoxy? I think young people are absolutely forcing this question.

REFLECTIONS: *You were involved in the president's faith-based initiatives and religious engagement for four years, and you led faith outreach for his 2012 re-election campaign. What did you learn by working for the White House?*

WEAR: One big lesson I learned that feeds into our conversation here: In large, bureaucratic institutions, many of the important things you work on don't necessarily have clear, immediate outcomes. Whether it's international development, immigration, adoption, or anti-human trafficking efforts, the "wins" can take years. And the credit might go to a lot of people, not just you. That realization could be a struggle for an individualistic Millennial generation that is accustomed to celebrating its individual achievements with thousands of people instantly. The struggle for justice, for the common good, is a joint project.

REFLECTIONS: *Will this generation's values change national politics?*

WEAR: Yes, I believe they will. Millennials are less interested in ideological thought and less willing to subject their political views to party platforms. This means that coalitions will be more difficult to pull together, and we have the potential to see more fluid party alliances and voting patterns. We will also continue to see national politicians expand the ways they reach voters, in an attempt to meet individual voters where they are and in a way that feels directly relevant to their lives. Politics will become personal in a way we could not have imagined.

Mapping a Young Adult Spirituality

By Angela Batie Carlin

Some years ago when I was taking classes for a Spiritual Direction Certificate at a local theological school, I noticed I was the only student in our practicum who offered spiritual direction to people in their 20s and 30s.

This was curious. I perceived a bias in some of the literature that said the “suitable candidate” for spiritual direction is an older person with the “spiritual maturity” of several decades of life experience. On the contrary, I became convinced that young adults need spiritual direction as much as any other generation, perhaps even more.

The spiritual path of every young adult is unique, yet I find strong common themes among this faith-seeking demographic that faith communities – and ministers in particular – should understand.

- **Old wineskins, new wine:** Perhaps the most significant theme in the spiritual lives of many young adults is the challenge of reconciling the catechesis of childhood with a nuanced experience of adult life. If religious lessons from childhood later seem insufficient, will the young adult give herself permission to adapt that childhood framework to life’s changing circumstances? Is the faith tradition of childhood

Many young adults crave unplugged silence in order to seek encounter with God. Yet they might be unsure about how to use that time.

still the right spiritual home, or is it time to seek a new community whose values and practices more closely mirror her emerging identity? Or will she reject religion outright and become “spiritual but not religious?” Confronting the limitations of one’s belief structure can be scary. It is critical that people have a non-judgmental support system where they can explore this fragile reality and find hope for the future.

- **Love:** The period of young adulthood can bring the profound experience of romantic love – and also the well-known related turbulence of break-up, rejection, loneliness, or longing. The lesson that “God is love” can be understood by an eight-year-old, but it takes on new dimensions for a 27-year-old who is reeling from a break-up, a 34-year-old who realizes she wants to spend the rest of her life with her partner, or a 37-year-old who wonders if he will ever meet the right person. As the heart matures, the joys and sorrows of love influence – or are reinterpreted by – the unfolding relationship with a God who is love. The varied experience of love and its encounter (or dissonance) with the sexual ethics of a faith tradition bring new challenges to the spirituality of adulthood.

- **Loss:** Many young adults face their first bout with grief in the form of the first loss of a loved one. Unlike future losses, though, they lack experience that offers strength in this painful period. They cannot say, “I’ve felt like this before, and it got better over time. I will emerge from this, too.” Instead, the grief can feel hopeless and provoke difficult questions about life’s purpose, the afterlife, and the nature of God.

- **Discernment:** For many people, crucial moments of discernment happen during the young adult years. Emerging adults face an unrelenting onslaught of major life decisions: educational pursuits, career path, personal vocation, marriage or partnership, parenthood, geographic relocation. In the midst of the big decisions, young adults are choosing *how* they will live those decisions – how to be ethical in the workplace, how to contribute to the wider society, political activism, parenting style. Having an impartial listener to offer support

and share wisdom from Christian tradition can be a compass in the midst of terrifying uncertainty.

- **Spiritual discipline:** Many young adults crave silence and even commit to “unplugging” in order to seek encounter with God. Yet when they do enter into a precious few minutes of quiet, they might find themselves unsure about how to use that time. What does it really mean to pray? Where can someone talk about the experience of silence or be held accountable to a fledgling commitment to regular prayer? How can the experience of prayer overflow into the rest of life? Spiritual companions can offer guidance as young adults learn to cultivate their own spiritual well-being.

How can the church respond to this spectrum of issues?

Young adults are more than just new recruits for parish membership rolls. It’s important for faith communities to cultivate authentic relationship and meet young adults where they are in their lives. Some starting places may include:

- **Spiritual direction:** We’re in a time of rising interest in the professional ministry of spiritual direction. More theological schools now offer spiritual direction certification programs. Many people would benefit from spiritual direction, yet few know it exists

As the heart matures, the joys and sorrows of love influence – or are reinterpreted by – the unfolding relationship with a God who is love.

or how to arrange it. The church should develop relationships with local spiritual directors, make congregants aware of their services, and support that work by allowing church facilities as a space to meet. The directory at Spiritual Directors International (www.sdiworld.org) is a good resource.

- **Mentorship:** A young adult who skips church on Sunday mornings might still be willing to meet for coffee with a mentor in the congregation. Mentoring is a mutual relationship of shared interests and respect cultivated for the benefit of the young adult. The mentor is there to listen, not to instruct. The pastoral staff can provide training and formation for those who want to become mentors.

- **Spiritual programming:** Partnering with nearby churches to offer a “busy person’s retreat” can be a rich way to give all parishioners, including young adults, a concrete experience in regular prayer and spiritual direction. Through a week- or month-long

“retreat in everyday life,” a person commits to daily prayer and periodic meetings with a prayer companion. The companion helps the retreatant sort out and ponder his experience of prayer. Young adults are often more willing to pursue a program that offers a finite commitment and flexible scheduling.

- **Small faith-sharing groups:** These are growing in popularity. Participants commit to meeting regularly for prayer, scripture reflection, and life sharing. Often led by trained parishioners, these gatherings allow young adults to connect with other members of the parish. Empowering young adults to take

Having an impartial listener to offer support and share wisdom from Christian tradition can be a compass in the midst of terrifying uncertainty.

turns leading sessions can build their confidence to take on greater leadership roles. The organization Christian Life Community provides a great model. See www.youngadultclc.org.

- **Online sources:** Young adults are much more likely to tour a church’s virtual site before they step foot inside the physical one. A pdf of an online meditation or a tweeted link about discernment may be, for some young adults, a godsend.

With creativity, patience, and commitment, our faith communities can be companions for young adult seekers through the complicated landscape of their spiritual journeys.

Angela Batie Carlin '07 M.Div. is a Roman Catholic spiritual director and retreat leader in Tacoma, WA. She previously worked with young adults in a university setting and in retreat center administration. Her writing has appeared in U.S. Catholic magazine, and she contributed to the 2010 book From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and Catholicism (Liturgical Press).

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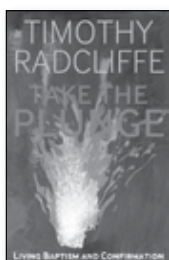
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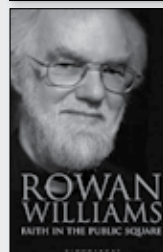


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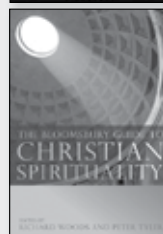
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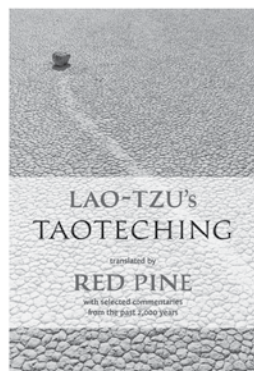
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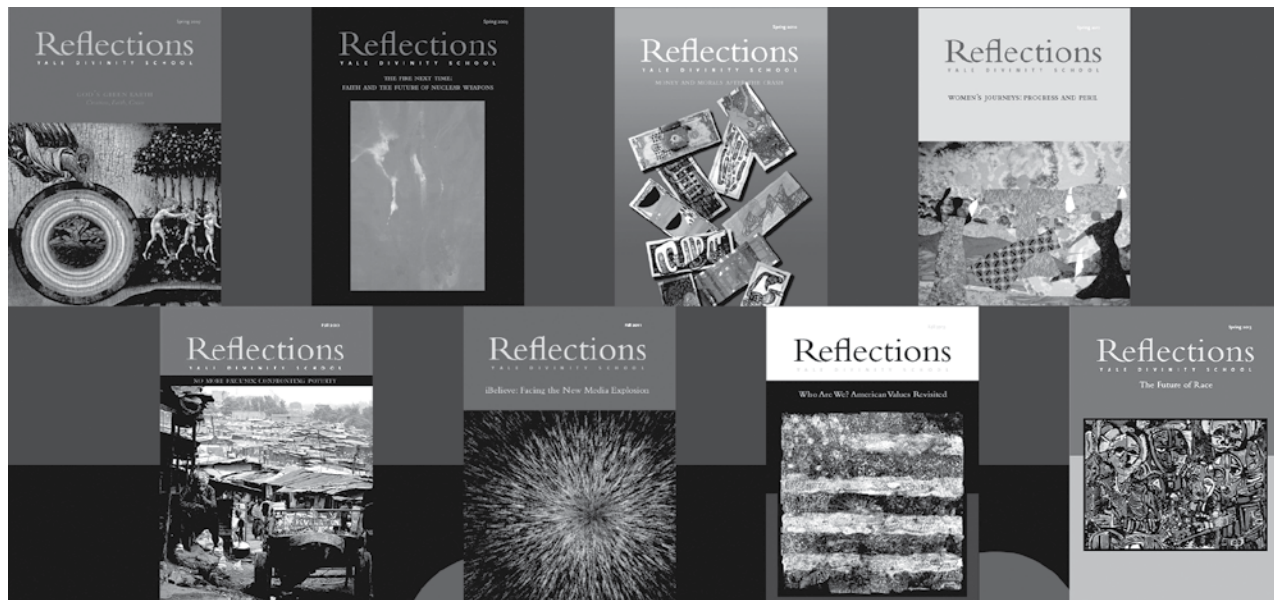
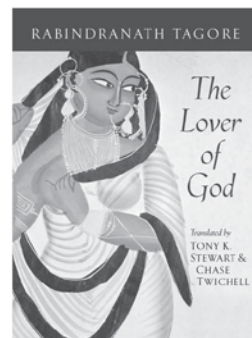
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From the Editor: Firewall

By Ray Waddle



"Why don't more young people go to church?" You can Google and get answers, lists of them, in a matter of nanoseconds. The answers and reasons are many and familiar, sometimes contradictory. Emerging adults are overwhelmed and overscheduled. "Christian" is politically

discredited. They're sick of fast-paced worship entertainment. Or, real-time worship is too slow. Online spirituality is more immediate. Or, ancient liturgy is more authentic, something real to the touch.

A lot of these make sense. But after a while, I quit searching the question. An orthodoxy of answers solidifies. A faint scent of blame comes wafting across the tidy bullet summaries – a blame of younger people.

Missing from these lists and litanies, often, is an acknowledgement by elders that young people are living in moral and psychological conditions they inherited, conditions created by others. An older crowd – my crowd – has overseen or prearranged much of it: a world of stark inequalities, computer takeovers, political dysfunction, Wall Street worship, pluralism, automation, debt, and noise.

Two themes especially come to mind.

1) Since the end of the Cold War, a new revolution has been unstoppable – an efficient partnership between globalized capitalism and technology that is remaking social expectations and behavior. Today's go-go yet so-so economy rewards multitasking, speed, 24/7 networking, the next sleepless competitive edge.

Indeed, for four decades we've seen an intensification of corporate branding, individualism, and entrepreneurship. In his book *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, Bruce Schulman says the counterculturalism of the 1960s got revised in the 70s, and today we live in its aftermath: Capitalist entrepreneurship, not street protests and technocratic solutions, has become the engine of social transformation and personal empowerment.

This has reshaped the spiritual quest. It's more personal, customized, improvisational, less reliant on the formulations of tradition. People are curating their own narratives.

2) The word "Christian" itself has mutated over the last 40 years. The public career of the word

since the 1970s deserves a book in itself. Bluntly put, "Christian" has been weaponized. In the public mind, "Christian" has become synonymous with conservative ideology, voter blocs, tax relief, and war. As a result, the word "Christian" has been dramatically forsaken by potential believers – and by droves of active churchgoers – who don't share the politics. This includes young people by the millions.

Despite an ear for liturgy and a heart for Golden Rule, moderate and liberal churches have been unable to break this retail monopoly of Christian identity by others. Seeing no room for their own imagination in the available choices, younger people move on. They seek freedom elsewhere.

Owning up to these developments, we might start a new conversation about the secular values that really rule the day and how a more honest gospel witness is a joint adventure between generations.

Preparing this Spring issue of *Reflections* has made me more hopeful of the possibilities. In these last several months, talking over coffee or witnessing their worship experiments, I've met admirable individuals – young ministers, theologians, musicians – involved in a serious search about the meaning of God and discipleship, a hunger to embody belief with practical action, an impatience to leave behind many of the debates of old.

Whenever I've mentioned to them the good old days when public theologians landed on the cover of *Time* (Reinhold Niebuhr in 1948, Paul Tillich in 1959), and Billy Graham was America's pastor, they shrug. They have no nostalgia for that. Things weren't so great back then: Cold War, segregation, the silence of women and minorities. Young people are defining their own debates. They're waking up to a new world every day, one they didn't necessarily ask for, but they're entering it with good will and verve. They're alert to new moves of the Spirit.

I'm grateful to the contributing writers in this *Reflections* issue for sharing their insights, allowing readers to eavesdrop on a spectrum of arguments and intuitions that are finding the light of day in this new unfolding era.

A recurring theme in these pages is that the face of Christian faith will surely change but it will never disappear. My stubborn hunch is that the church will always provide a firewall that resists the bullying of ideology and the corrosions of hopelessness – a firewall of baptism, scripture, prayer, bread, wine, eye contact, hospitality, and reconciliation. The next generation, and the one after, will see to that.

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POETRY

The Rev. Charles H. Harper '61 S.T.M. is a poet and retired United Church of Christ minister living in Plymouth, MA. Harper's work can be seen at www.harperpoetry.com.

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Bob Hicok is the author of *Insomnia Diary* (University of Pittsburgh, 2004), *Words for Empty and Words for Full* (Pittsburgh, 2010), and other works. He teaches at Virginia Tech.

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Nate Klug '13 M.Div. works as a UCC-Congregationalist minister in Grinnell, IA. His poems, translations, and essays have appeared in journals including *Poetry*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *The Yale Review*, and in a 2012 chapbook, *Consent* (Pressed Wafer). His versions of Virgil's *Eclogues*, called *Rude Woods*, was published last year by The Song Cave. His first book of poems, *Anyone*, will be out next year from the University of Chicago Phoenix Poets Series.

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Ron Turner is an attorney and prison consultant in Hendersonville, TN., and former director of Religious and Volunteer Services for the Tennessee Department of Correction. He is the author of the book of poetry *My Father, My Sons and Me in Between* (Radnor Press, 1997). His poems can be seen at www.poetskiss.com.

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Chase Twichell is the author of *Dog Language* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005) and other books. She is co-translator of *The Lover of God*, poems by Rabindranath Tagore (Copper Canyon, 2003).

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