

Young Adult Ministry: Neglected Stewardship?

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1. Introduction

Having spoken to many Pastors and Young Adults (hereafter YA's), I suspect that a disparity exists between the number of YA's in any given South African social environment, and that of any given local church in that same environment. The reasons for this are varying and worthy of further research as an entirely separate subject. The problem is not only the reasons for the lack of YA's in our churches, but how we are to effectively minister to them. My concern is that in the South African environment, the 'Young Adults' segment comprises the largest sector of the age demographics yet this is not reflected in our Baptist churches. Consider the following figures from Statistics SA:

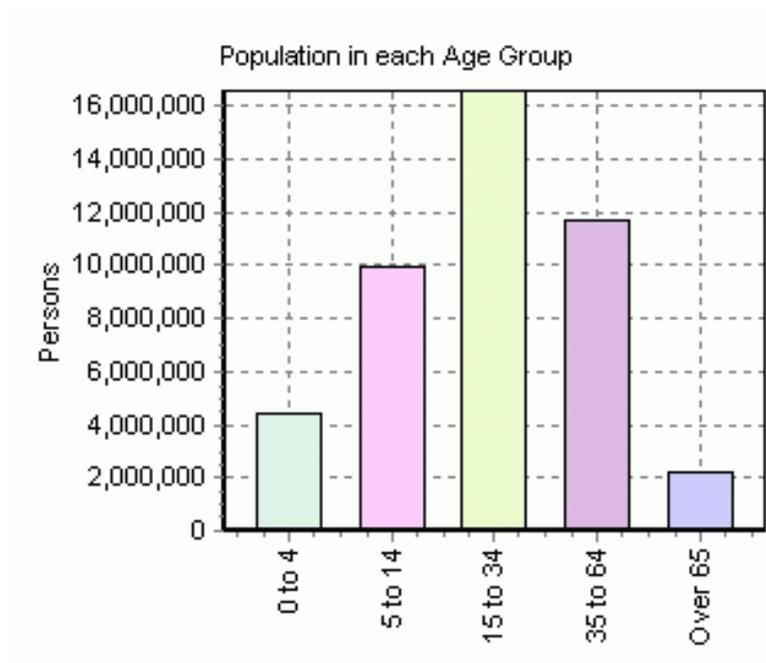


Figure 1: Age Demographics, Total Figures, for South Africa

(taken from www.statssa.gov.za)

The statistics tell us that the age group 15 – 34 comprises the largest sector of society in South Africa by at least 25%. From my initial research, it appears that the

demographics of most Baptist Churches do not reflect what we see in society, and that a chasm exists between the ages of 18 – 35. This entire generation is missing and if we are to be truly one Body, we need to make every effort to rectify this imbalance.

2. The Current Situation

South Africa is a land comprised mainly of YA's, as the following diagram illustrates:

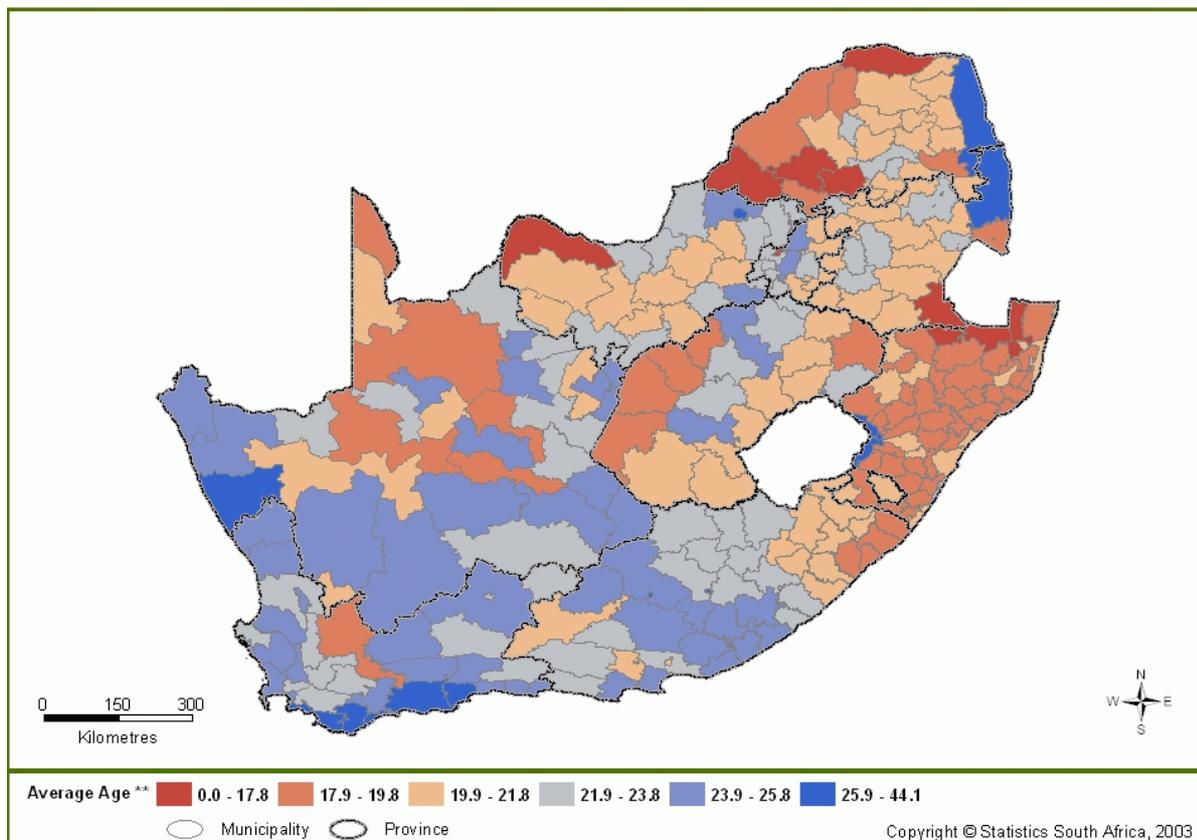


Figure 2: Median Age per Region: South Africa

obtained from www.statssa.gov.org

The KwaZulu Natal area, the northern region of the Eastern Cape along with the northern areas of the country have a median age between 17.9 – 21.8 years of age, while the Western Cape, most of the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape have a median age of 23.9 -25.8 years of age. YA's then form the core age group of most South African societies. The issue then is this: do the demographics of our churches reflect what we see in society? The various discussions I have had with Young Adult Pastors

and workers indicate that this is unfortunately not the case. In an article written for the 2003 South African Baptist Journal of Theology, Riaan Niemand writes that already in 1993 the youth department of the Baptist Union recognized that Young Adults as a ministry needed to be looked at in a more serious light. As a result a survey was conducted in 1994 to establish the state of YA's ministry in the Baptist Union. Two areas of concern were noted; namely:

1. Only 30.5% of the congregations in the Union had a ministry to YA's.
2. There was a large group of YA's who attended Church, but who were *not involved* in the ministry of the congregations (45.40% of all YA's attending Baptist Churches were not involved in any ministry at the time of the survey)

In this article Riaan Niemand expresses his concern that although a forum within the Union was established in 1993 and the survey conducted in 1994, nothing had changed 10 years on. He states: "Although the study was done almost a decade ago I would venture to say that things have not improved. Some discussions at a previous Assembly (2002) supported this concern" (2003:218).

The question I would ask then is this: since Riaan Niemand raised this concern *again* in 2003, has anything changed in the last four years? I am concerned the answer is *no!* The Barna Group, who conduct research specifically into religious matters, compiled the results of a survey conducted in 2003 regarding YA's and church participation. The results are discouraging as the research, conducted with 2,660 "twentysomethings", shows that (YA's) in their twenties are significantly less likely than any other age group to attend church services, to donate to churches, to be absolutely committed to Christianity, to read the Bible, or to serve as a volunteer or lay leaders in churches. The researcher concludes: "The most striking reality of "twentysomething's" faith *is their relative absence from Christian churches. Only 3 out of 10 twentysomethings (31%) attend church in a typical week*, compared to 4 out of 10 of those in their 30s (42%) and nearly half of all adults age 40 and older (49%). [<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=149>] (*italics mine*)

The most disappointing results of the survey however, are that YA's who used to attend Church and were actively involved, are turning their back on the churches. The survey concludes that: "Many twentysomethings are reversing course after having been active church attenders (*sic*) during their teenage years...from high school graduation to age 25 there is a 42% drop in weekly church attendance and a 58% *decline from age 18 to age 29*. That represents about 8,000,000 twentysomethings alive today (in the USA)

who were active church-goers as teenagers but who will no longer be active in a church by their 30th birthday.”

(<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=149>). In 2006 the Barna Group conducted the same research again. The new figures revealed that the situation had worsened (although only slightly). The new survey revealed that: “61% of today’s young adults – who had been churched at one point during their teen years...are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying). Statistics such as these mentioned above are being backed up by other research results. In a survey conducted in May 2007, one of the young adults I interviewed gave me an indication that the situation in South Africa is very similar when she stated: “I used to be very involved in church, and *most of my friends that I have now used to go to Church*, but things have changed and we are just not that interested in Church anymore” (Survey conducted May 2007, anonymous response). The question then that follows is this: what has caused this situation? Why are YA’s *not* attending our churches?

3. Reasons for the Disparity

YA’s are people in transition. They are in a period of flux and not only finding their feet in an adult world, they are also trying to find out who they are. As Rolf Hagemann states: “They (young adults) are still trying to identify their reason for living, their place in the world, and ultimately, their own destiny” (Baptists Today, 2007, Issue 1, p 14). It is crucial then that the churches takes seriously their ministry to young adults. In an article by Audrey Barrick entitled “*Survey: Young Adults Want Genuine Church*”; Barrick states “A new LifeWay survey found that a major factor causing young adults to fall out of the pews is the church's inability to minister to them in their transition stage”. She continues and writes: “Young adults are in the middle – not married, not old enough, not in high school; we're in this 'ugh' stage,” said one survey respondent in the latest LifeWay Research report. (<http://www.christianpost.com/article/20061207/23925.htm>)

In my research and interviews with YA’s, it became clear that there were two predominant reasons why they had turned their back on the churches. The first reason is that they felt like they did not belong and the second reason is that they did not feel like the whole experience of attending church was authentic, either for themselves or the people they saw at church. When asked what they most disliked about church,

most of the respondents said “Superficiality”. On the other hand when asked what they liked most about church, most respondents answered “a sense of community” (Survey conducted May 2007). This corresponds with other research conducted in this regard. Regarding the LifeWay survey mentioned earlier, Barrick states : “the survey measured people age 18 to 34 and found that this particular group's greatest need is community. According to the findings, 73 percent of church members and 47 percent of non-affiliated YA's indicated that community with other YA's is extremely important in their lives. Once they end high school, churches send them away to their next life stage without accountability” (<http://www.christianpost.com/article/20061207/23925.htm>). Barrick says that churches do not hold YA's accountable. Unfortunately once we set the precedent of not providing for YA's where they are at now, we have very little chance of them returning in the future. It is my belief that not having focused YA's ministries accounts for the 61% dropout of YA's mentioned earlier. In fact the researchers at Barna summarise their findings by stating: “The notion that these people will return to the church when they get older or once they become parents *is only true in a minority of cases*”

(<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=149>)

So if it's authenticity and community that young adults seek, how do we design church in order to meet their needs?

4. A Model for Ministering to Young Adults

The method of reaching young adults *is not the same* as the method used to reach children teens or older generations . In the past there has been a three-tiered approach to reaching disciples for Christ, namely: 1. Evangelism, 2. Discipleship 3. Leadership.

While this model may still be applicable for certain demographic segments, I do not believe it is applicable to young adult ministry. The reason I state this is that firstly there is a vital element missing, namely RELATIONSHIP. Secondly, young adults want to be authentic and so they seek legitimate answers to their questions *before they consider even becoming a Christian*. As a result I would propose a change to the way we minister to young adults. Rolf Hagemann concurs when he states: “The only way we will reach this generation is through providing a genuine Christ powered Church. This does not mean changing the message, but may mean changing the methodology.” (Baptist's Today, Issue 2, 2007, p16). I propose that young adults ministry is based on a five-

tiered approach: 1. Relationship 2. Discipleship 3. Evangelism 4. Discipleship 5. Leadership

4.1 Relationship

YA's seek community. Riaan Niemand writes: "Make community the goal. Young adults are social creatures and this need must be met by the church" (2003:220). So often our relationships with YA's are based on the once a week ritual of meeting at the evening service on a Sunday night. YA's desire relationships that are deeper than this. Susan Cooper in an article entitled '*Young adult ministry is vital to church's future*' states: "YA's and youth spend their days in front of video screens. They use online communities like Facebook and My Space to interact with others. They have blogs, webcams. They're online all the time. Giving them "face time" by taking the time to listen and building relationships is crucial to reaching young people who spend so much of their time in the 'virtual world.'

(http://www.kswestumc.org/news_detail.asp?PKValue=351). It is clear that relationships are the key reason for YA's attending Church. The Church, however, does not seem to be getting this right. We have yet to learn the value of building relationships with our young adults. As one anonymous respondent said regarding this issue: "After school, the church gives you a pat on the back and says "see you when you're older" (Survey conducted May 2007). YA's desire not only relationships with other young adults, but also inter-generational relationships. The value of mentor-type relationships is evident from the results of the lack of such relationships. In the same study referred to above, conducted by the Student Leadership Training Network, the correlation between relational factors during young adulthood and YA church attendance was researched. The study showed that YA's with two or less older adult friends attend church less often. In addition if their older adult friends (teachers, coaches, employers, neighbors, co-workers, etc.) are shallow Christians, these young adults are less likely to attend church.

(http://www.sltm.com/FJYA/Study/quant_findings.htm). It cannot be overstressed that if we seek to have a growing, vibrant YA adult ministry, we should focus on developing relationships with every young adult that we meet. Not only is it important to develop relationships with YA's, it is as important that they are made to feel that through their relationships with the pastoral team and other believers, that they are part of a community of believers. As Baugh and Hurst affirm: "A postmodern evangelical

community must continue to move people away from autonomous individualism. Postmodern evangelicalism will always place the individual within a community. We were created to be in a relationship with God and each other, and the breakdown of relationships has been a major concern for postmodern young adults” (2000:6).

4.2 *Discipleship*

Why discipleship before evangelism? The answer is simple: many YA’s entering churches today in pursuit of spirituality have no background in the church. Leonard Sweet tells of Jay Leno’s periodic ‘man-on-the-street’ interviews. He tells of Leno interviewing passers-by regarding their knowledge of the Bible. Sweet picks up the story: ““Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?” he asked two college-age women. One replied, “Freedom of speech?” Leno then asks the other student: “Complete the sentence: “Let he who is without sin...” “have a good time” was her response. Leno then turned to a young man and asked, “Who, according to the Bible, was eaten by a whale?” The confident answer was “Pinocchio”” (1999, p60). Barrick, a reporter from Christian Post writes in an article entitled ‘*Survey: Young Adults Want Genuine Church*’ that “...71 percent of YA churchgoers said they want to participate in small-group meetings *to discuss life application of Scripture*. They, along with those not affiliated (i.e. non church members), said they *desired to participate in Bible study that minimizes finding pat answers in the exploration of Scripture.*” (<http://www.christianpost.com/article/20061207/23925.htm>). It is vital that any church interested in ministering to YA’s has Bible studies that are designed for the seeker, for the YA that has never attended Sunday School. This does not mean having Bible studies that are vague and simplistic, but rather having studies that focus on the basics of the Christian Faith.

4.3 *Evangelism*

Once a relationship is established with YA’s, evangelism is the logical conclusion. As Leonard Sweet states: “Evangelism requires love. Lack of evangelism means lack of love” (1999, p60). For YA’s the decision to become a Christian is not based on fact alone. Rather they have a far more holistic approach to making the most important decision of their lives. YA’s will take into account their experience of church, their experience of others and whether or not this relationship they will have with God is legitimate and authentic. This is the aspect I find most satisfying in YA’s ministry. Their

conversion is often very strong as they have a deep knowledge that this is true and genuine, in a world that says there is no truth. It is for this reason that YA's are very missions-focused. The truth has changed them and they want to share it with the world.

4.4 Discipleship

The next phase of this five-tiered model requires discipleship again. Why is this? It is because discipleship previously focused on the Christian basics; the truth about Jesus and what it means to be a Christian. After becoming a Christian YA's want to know *how being a Christian is meant to impact their lives*. As Rydberg (1990:5) states: "Christian young adults hunger for spiritual depth. They want to know what the Bible says and if what it says works in real life. Away from home, they can no longer 'borrow' their parents faith; *they have to discover a faith they can call their own*. That involves asking tough questions, searching for answers and discovering how their faith affects their lives." For any church interested in implementing this model, this is the ideal time to introduce the YA to inter-generational Home Church/cell groups. YA's want to hear from other Christians about how having a relationship with Jesus has changed them. This is the phase of strengthening the faith of the YA. A very effective way of doing this is to facilitate them developing relationships with at least two older Christians.

Once again YA's are not seeking a faith that suits them, they are seeking a faith that is genuine, they want to know how faith in Christ affects their daily lives. In an article in 'Christianity Today' Agnieszka Tennant interviews Colleen Carroll, author of '*The New Faithful: Why YA's Are Embracing Orthodox Christianity*'. In this article, Carroll says this about her research into what YA's are desiring: "*They want the hard gospel*. They want a preacher or priest to tell it like it is, *to give them morality that they believe is sound and doesn't simply cater to their whims*" (August 2002, p44). In my interviews with YA's, the question was asked "What influences your decision to come to church?"; the majority of the YA's listed two reasons in addition to having strong relationships in the church. These reasons are: 1. The preacher 2. The topic being preached

Very few indicated that they come to church for the style of worship or the informal, welcoming setting of the service. Young adults want to know what the Bible says. They want to be discipled. The process however, does not stop here. If we want to keep young adults in our churches we need to deliberately direct them into positions of leadership. What we need to be very aware of however, is the style of leadership that motivates YA's.

4.5 Leadership

If we are to be serious about ministering to young adults and having YA's play a greater role in our churches, then we need to look at the issue of YA's and leadership. Are we serious about developing leaders from this age group, or are we waiting for them to 'grow up' before we take them seriously? One YA who serves as a mentor to teenagers, had this to say: "The Church leadership is only interested in you being a leader if you will teach Sunday School or look after the kids. They are not really interested in developing you as a leader beyond that." (Survey conducted May 2007, anonymous response). The Barna group confirms that this YA may be justified in his thinking. Research conducted with 2,660 twentysomethings indicated that: "One of the reasons that many twentysomethings struggle to find their place in churches is that many young people may feel overlooked as potential leaders. The study showed that just 4% of young adults currently serve as a lay leader at their church; only 12% have been a leader at any time in the past two years. Older adults are three to four times more likely to serve as church leaders. The age group with the greatest number of church leaders are those in their 50s" (<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=149>)

Rolf Hagemann put this succinctly in 2006 in the 'Baptist's Today' magazine: "In reaching out to Young Adults therefore, *we are to be more focused on leadership...* young adults are longing for a new apologetic, one that changes lives and society. They are no longer convinced by 'commercial Christianity', but are looking for a faith that works. *Success in young adult ministry* will not be found in programmes or events, but *is found in service*. YA's are longing to reach out to others." (2006, p21).

This is the crucial phase in keeping YA's in our Churches. What must be kept in mind though is that YA's need to be led in a way that many of us are not used to. The business's YA's work for are changing in structure and YA's are being led in very different ways to the employees of ten years ago. This does not mean we should not be leading YA's or directing them into leadership positions. As Warren Bennis says regarding this change in business leadership models: "This does not mean the end of leadership. Rather the need for a new, far more subtle and indirect form of influence for leaders to be effective" (Crainer and Dearlove Ed., 2001:546). For years people have

spoken about servant leadership, all the while practicing 'top-down' pyramid style leadership. YA's not only want to be led by leaders who they see as servants, but they themselves want to be servants, to make a difference in society. Even though Bennis' article is written for a secular audience, there is benefit to be found in looking at what leadership specialists say young adults are looking for. For this reason I have taken the following structure from Bennis' article entitled 'The New Leadership' (Crainer and Dearlove Ed., 2001:546). I would suggest that anyone leading young adults with the aim of directing them into positions of leadership, should consider the following:

4.5.1 The New leader understands and practices the power of appreciation

Bennis explains that successful leaders of YA's are rarely the people with the most talent, but rather those had the ability to recognise talent, we would call it 'gifts'. They then let that person flourish in their area of talent. He gives as an example of such a leader, Peter Schneider, who has no animation drawing skills and yet heads up the team of 1 200 animators at Disney's 'Feature Animation Studio'. Is this not what Paul had in mind when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 12: 4-12:

"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ." (TNIV)

4.5.2 The New leader keeps reminding people of what's important

YA's need to be part of the process when the Church decides on her values and mission statement. Once you have their buy-in, they need to be reminded again and again what they do is invaluable to the complete body of believers to which they belong. We should always remember when we pastor YA's, that we are preparing "God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up..." (Eph 4:12 NIV)

4.5.3 The New leader generates and sustains trust

Bennis states: “Authenticity, as Grouch joked, cannot be faked. To be redundant, it’s real. The current cliché is ‘walk your talk’. But it’s far more than that.” (Crainer and Dearlove Ed., 2001:546). A good leader needs to be authentic if YA’s are expected to follow such a leader.

4.5.4 The New leader and the led are intimate allies

Bennis further states: “The new leader will not have the loudest voice, but the most attentive ear” (Crainer and Dearlove Ed., 2001:546). Jesus was such a leader, always being attentive to his followers and leading by serving. To lead YA’s we need to serve them first, let them know that we are here for them, that we value them, and then they will follow.

5. Conclusion

I firmly believe that it is the Church’s responsibility is to reach every generation with the love of Jesus Christ. If we are to reach YA’s, we must act deliberately and we must act now. They are a generation slipping away and it is our responsibility to reach out to them. A number of useful resources are unfortunately unavailable locally to Young Adults Pastors in South Africa. They can be ordered from Amazon.com, but are expensive. It appears however that they may be valuable to the Young Adult Pastor. These include the following books:

1. The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Orthodox Christianity by Colleen Carroll (mentioned earlier in this article).
2. Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith by Sharon Daloz Parks
3. 13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail? by Neil Howe (Author), et al.

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