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Innovative Communications and Service Opportunities Help Young Adults Rethink Church

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because new communication technologies are rapidly changing cultures globally, the church must use strategic communication to project its voice into the public conversation and to engage seekers, particularly young adults, in a life of faith.

In the past, the church determined which messages followers should hear and transmitted those messages through a vertical system of communication. Today, individuals engage in conversations with each other as well as with organizations. Because trust in institutions has eroded, top-down messaging fails as a consistent, effective channel. Individuals, empowered with new technology, determine the relevancy of messages. The messages of the church, therefore, must be carefully constructed with knowledge of the needs and interests of the people with whom it wishes to communicate.

The challenge is to communicate Christian faith in new ways through new and traditional media in the emerging reality of the 21st century. This strategic communication should spark creativity and innovation as the church connects with young adults in new, effective ways. One way The United Methodist Church seeks to communicate with and engage young adults is through the Rethink Church movement. This white paper summarizes the challenges facing the church and the early results of Rethink Church.

The Challenges the Church Faces in Connecting with Young Adults

The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The UMC Steering Team Call to Action Report¹ being discussed in The United Methodist Church states that the denomination's first priority must be a commitment to foster and sustain congregational vitality in order to be effective in this mission. In order to build vital congregations and communicate Christian faith in new ways that engage young adults, the denomination must address and overcome several challenges. Those challenges include the following.

The denomination must effectively connect with young adult seekers – ages 18-34 – if it is to pass the faith to the next generation. Results of a 2009 Barna study defined seekers as those who continue to search for spirituality in their lives, even though they are unaffiliated with a particular church.² That group of individuals now comprises 42 percent of those people ages 18-34, growing from just 32 percent in 2009.³

Barna researcher David Kinnaman documents several social trends that affect how the church reaches out to young adults. He reported his findings in his 2011 book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are*

Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith.⁴ The research that forms the basis of the book reveals that six out of 10 religiously active teens will disengage from the church in their 20s. Those who are leaving the church find relevance to be a key issue,

Those who are leaving the church find relevance to be a key issue, formed by past negative impressions.

formed by past negative impressions, lack of denominational loyalty, parity of organized religion, issues with membership, formality of church conventions, lack of desire to become a member, lifestyle inconvenience and a desire for individual expressions of faith. The issues center on young adults' perceptions of organized religion, rather than belief in God, prayer or the Bible. Three out of four non-churchgoing young adults who consider themselves Christian say they are absolutely or moderately committed to the Christian faith.



Three Distinctive Characteristics of Young Adults

Most faith communities are struggling with how to minister to young adults, according to Kinnaman's research, and the changing landscape of today's culture shapes this.

Access: Young adults today have unprecedented access to products, services, ideas and worldviews. The typical North American receives 34 gigabytes of information each day, according to calculations in a University of California study.⁵ That daily information diet

includes about 100,000 words, both those read in print and on the Web, as well as those heard on television and the radio. By comparison, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* contains about 460,000 words. The rise of new forms of learning allows people to control the content they

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access. This requires a change from talking at people to equipping them for the journey. Messages must be carefully constructed with knowledge of the needs and interests of young adults so that they are both relevant and accessible.

Alienation: An important result of this media saturation, paradoxically, is isolation and alienation. Young adults today are experiencing new levels of isolation from family, friends and community. Two recent trends illustrate this growing isolation and a mindset of "facing life alone": the rising number of single mothers and the delay of young adults starting families. The percentage of live births to single mothers was 5 percent in 1960 and 41 percent today; children are eight times more likely to be born to single mothers as compared with 1960. This trend affects the children's spiritual journey because the continuity of the parent's faith has the greatest impact on their offspring's faith. Along the same lines, the percentage of young adults who have completed major life transitions by age 30 has dropped from 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men in 1960 to 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men by 2000. The demographic that the church tends to reach best are young families; yet, young adults are waiting longer to establish families.



Authority: Another important result is the undermining of authority. While print made information accessible to more people, it took years to master complex disciplines and to master the logical framework that is inherent in print. Stories were translated to ideas that were contained as words on a page — a process that transformed thought, learning and power in society. As information becomes more widely available and easily accessed, power and authority, for good or ill, are weakened. Young adults today tend to question authority. Confidence in leaders of organized religion dropped from 41 percent in 1966 to 27 percent in 2007.⁶ North American discontent with institutions goes

beyond churches and is evidenced in skepticism toward many institutional bodies such as the press, Congress, the White House and major corporations.

Less Religious but More Service Minded

Furthermore, ongoing research conducted by the Pew Research Center⁷ indicates that young adults, ages 18-29, qualify as the least overtly religious generation in modern times, with one in four unaffiliated with any religion. The United Methodist Seeker Tracking Study of young adults revealed that 37 percent never attend church. (Fig. 1)

Yet this same age group has a strong appetite for engaging in causes; 37 percent of those surveyed had donated money to a non-profit organization, 36 percent had volunteered time, and 32 percent had tried to persuade someone to support a cause. The average seeker who volunteers spends 4.5 hours every two weeks in volunteer-related activities. The United Methodist Seeker Tracking Study⁸ interviewed various age groups to gauge their interest in service. Approximately 35 percent of the 18-24-year-olds interviewed either had participated in a service trip or planned to within the next three years. That number dropped to 20 percent for 25-33 year olds and 44-62 year olds, and 18 percent for those older

How often do you attend church services, not including special events such as weddings or funerals?

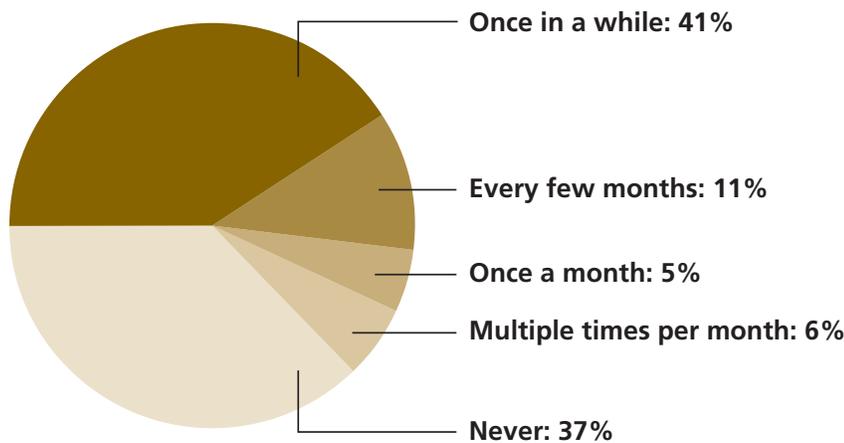


Fig. 1. A Barna Group survey of young adults reveals a large portion never attend church, illustrating the fact that the emerging generation is not religious.

than 63. Therefore, inviting this emerging generation to serve in the community is an effective entry point into church involvement. The issues in which this age group has the most interest include social welfare and relief, education, and health and medical, the Barna study indicated. Their interest in helping others provides a natural intersection with the active faith of The United Methodist Church.

Horizontal Communication Through New Media Prevails

Research shows young adults receive their information primarily from new media sources and through online sharing with their peers, rather than from institutional channels. The United Methodist Seeker Tracking Study revealed that 81 percent of the young adults surveyed relied on websites for information.⁹ In regard to peers as a valued information source, a Pew Research Center study of approximately 2,000 young adults, ages 18-29, showed that 75 percent posted a profile on a social networking site.¹⁰ Furthermore, 83 percent of this group sleeps with their cell phones beside them. In the past, the church, like most other organizations, communicated through a vertical top-down system, but today's horizontal world of global communications alters this radically. Individuals now engage in conversation with each other. They filter out messages that don't matter to them or that don't attract their interest. Top-down messaging fails as a consistent, effective channel due to these alternatives and the underlying lack of trust.

United Methodist Communications launched Rethink Church, a movement that encapsulates communications strategies that draw seekers and young adults to the denomination.

The Solution: Rethink Church and Multiple Entry Points

The United Methodist Church recognizes its strength as consisting of active, interconnected faith communities that originated in the Wesleyan tradition. Wesley

emphasized that faith is both personally transforming and expressed in outward-bound action known as "social holiness." As the first step to address the communications challenge of reaching young adults, United Methodist Communications invested time and resources to collaborate with local churches about this strength, which connects with the needs and interests of the younger generation.



As the next step, United Methodist Communications launched Rethink Church, a movement that encapsulates communications strategies that draw seekers and young adults into the relationship with the denomination and local churches through outward-bound initiatives. Since United Methodist Communications launched the movement in 2009, Rethink Church has become one of the most widely known initiatives within the denomination. In its first year, 80 percent of clergy, 57 percent of leaders and 41 percent of members were familiar with the program.¹¹ In response to Rethink Church, congregations have implemented numerous outreach events.

Digital Entry Points

The Rethink Church movement serves as an authentic living example of the church in action, offering seekers both digital and physical access points into The United Methodist Church. RethinkChurch.org, the movement’s website, serves as the digital centerpiece of the campaign. The site provides United Methodists with multiple media platforms to discuss how their churches are rethinking outward-bound mission, while providing a way for seekers to find churches and service events in

their community and to explore faith as a daily, active experience. Visitors can request a free Common English New Testament on the site. The site’s Find-A-Church feature allows visitors to search for local United Methodist churches and view their profiles. Churches will have the capability to upload photos and videos

to their church profiles. An interactive map enables users to search for churches based upon parameters such as distance and ministry offerings or outreach programs that appeal to their interests, and will provide additional information such as worship and event schedules.

Other digital entry points include the Encounter Faith Online Bible Study, which uses Faithlink curriculum produced by The United Methodist Publishing House, the Change the World event map, Sight Psalms (a ministry of the General Board of Discipleship), the denomination’s Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. The campaign has employed both traditional and digital media advertising on digital

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spaces where people congregate such as the online video site Hulu, and seeks to widen readership by feeding content to other online spaces that discuss issues of importance to the denomination and to the target demographic.

Local Service Events

Rethink Church also features physical presence entry points through local outreach events that illustrate community involvement as a cornerstone of The United Methodist Church, engage community volunteers, and create opportunities for witness and invitation to the unchurched. Communication is essential to the success of these efforts. Grants made available through Rethink Church, as well as assistance with media planning, placement, design, event planning and public relations, enable local churches of all sizes, particularly rural and small membership churches, to connect with the overall campaign. For example, 14,600 volunteers from the 15 districts of the Western North Carolina annual (regional) conference recently served 620,000 people in their communities through 320 local service events. These districts consist primarily of rural and small churches. The example of Western North Carolina is particularly poignant because a post-event study conducted by an independent research company, Corporate Research of Greensboro, NC, highlighted the fact that favorable impression of The United Methodist Church went up dramatically among the 18-34 year old demographic (25% as a national average to 68% in Western North Carolina) demonstrating the effectiveness of pairing advertising efforts with community outreach.¹²

Coordinated advertising and communications strategies promote local events, often drawing volunteers new to the local churches. As an example, the Kalamazoo District of the West Michigan Annual Conference hosted a community Christmas dinner at Stockbridge United Methodist Church for people in need.¹³ Volunteers served hot meals and distributed winter clothing, ground tarps for the homeless and toys for the children. The event attracted 325 volunteers, with half drawn from outside the church. Though the annual event was established five years ago, there had never been a coordinated communications strategy until the congregations collaborated with Rethink Church last year. Communications efforts helped them dramatically to increase the number of volunteers and double the number of people served. The increased awareness generated through

advertising brought additional donations from corporate partners. Likewise, a day of service recently hosted by 20 United Methodist churches in Topeka, Kan., drew nearly 1,000 volunteers to do outdoor cleanup work; 200 of the volunteers were new to the churches. This was the third annual event, and they have raised the bar each year, adding more risk-taking mission.¹⁴

Eighty-two percent of the volunteers at a one-day service event in El Paso, Texas, were not part of the local church, and 4 out of 10 of those volunteers were from the target 18-34 age group. Of particular importance was the strategic way communications channels were chosen in order to reach the neighborhood residents of Segundo Barrio, located in the poorest urban ZIP code in the United States. One was radio because many residents listen to a local Spanish-language radio station. The second was fliers posted on utility poles throughout the neighborhood. Through the event, approximately 1,200 people in need received 16 tons of food, and 400 people had health screenings. Targeted communications efforts were successful in generating both attendance and volunteers and illustrate how communications supports programmatic efforts, discipleship and Christian mission. Post-event, some of the volunteers returned to attend one of the participating churches.¹⁵

Connecting with the church through mission can have profound effects. For example, six churches in five rural Kentucky cities joined forces to launch a day of service. Approximately 336 volunteers completed 44 projects, including food distribution, home repairs and free health screenings. One Kentucky church baptized three new members as a result of participation in the event. These events have drawn thousands of non-member volunteers.¹⁶ An average of 42 percent of volunteers are not affiliated with any church.

These events are more than social activities. They provide an entry point for those who are skeptical, uninformed, or have had negative experiences with organized religion. From this entry point, the intent is to encourage a process of rethinking what it means to be a follower of Jesus today, and to engage individuals in an ongoing relationship that leads to an understanding of the gracious and redemptive love of God that transforms our lives. This journey occurs and is supported by a community of faith.

Global Service Events

Global service events also serve as physical entry points for seekers. United Methodist churches around the globe joined for Change the World, a two-day service event in May 2010 and 2011. During the 2010 inaugural event, more than 100,000 people from 1,000 churches in 13 countries hosted events in which volunteers distributed food, planted gardens, tutored youth, raised funds for worthy causes and more. The concept for Change the World came from a book by the same name by the Rev. Mike Slaughter. A United Methodist pastor, he wrote that seekers want to be part of a mission to make a difference in the world. In 2011, church participation increased, dispatching 250,000 volunteers and serving more than 3 million people. During the 2011 event, the Rethink Church website featured live streaming of interviews with event participants from around the world, including Japan, Mozambique, Uganda, Germany, Ukraine, the Philippines and the United States. Several interviews highlighted the work of missionaries commissioned outside the United States by the General Board of Global Ministries. The Rethink Church YouTube channel features the interviews in video clips that local churches can use for worship services and in study settings.

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To aid churches in planning and promoting Change the World events, United Methodist Communications produced marketing materials in 10 languages, litanies in five languages and advertisements in three languages. Events were promoted through mass email, Facebook posts, tweets, online

digital advertising, outdoor boards, radio, television (in Louisiana) and headlines in local publications. Change the World involves many United Methodist entities, including the General Board of Global Ministries, the General Board of Discipleship, the General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Men, United Methodist Women and more. Change the World cultivates unity as various constituencies share in the social faith common to all United Methodists.



As part of the 2010 Change the World event, the denomination formally launched the Imagine No Malaria campaign in Austin, Texas, on World Malaria Day. This collaborative effort includes the General Board of Global Ministries/UMCOR and the General Board of Church and Society, plus numerous annual conferences and hundreds of local churches. More than 2,000 people attended the event, and many more joined online to raise funds to help eliminate death and suffering from malaria in Africa by 2015. The campaign has raised more than \$18 million so far. Leading up to the campaign, thousands of people in the Democratic Republic of Congo attended

events where they learned how to prevent malaria by using bed nets. United Methodist volunteers and partner groups distributed 30,000 insecticide-treated bed nets in the region. The United Methodist Church also provided \$150,000 toward

Imagine No Malaria is mobilizing the people of The United Methodist Church to act against a disease that claims a child's life every 45 seconds.

the net distribution, raising money through donations and grassroots efforts. Following a net distribution in the Bo District of Sierra Leone, local leaders even made requests for new churches to be started in the area. Imagine No Malaria is mobilizing the people of The United Methodist Church to act against a disease that claims a child's life every 45 seconds. Through fundraising and advocacy, this mission in Africa is saving lives, revitalizing congregations and transforming the world by making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Local Church Resources

The Rethink Church movement provides marketing materials and sermons to local churches to equip them to welcome seekers. An online tutorial explains how local churches can create profiles for the Find-A-Church section of the campaign website. Local pastors can access resources to tie weekly, Advent and Lenten sermons to Rethink Church. In addition, the campaign provides online marketing collateral including graphics, video stories and logos; as well as traditional marketing materials such as print ads, door hangers, postcards, banners, DVDs, buttons, T-shirts and posters. Radio and TV ads for the Rethink Church campaign can be customized for local churches.

CONCLUSION

By using strategic communications to project its voice into the public conversation, the church can reinforce and interject humane values into society and empower churches to become life-changing conduits. The church, therefore, must construct messages carefully, aware of the needs and interests of those with whom we seek to engage.

As part of its communications strategy, The United Methodist Church implemented the Rethink Church movement. Rethink Church challenges local congregations to communicate and act strategically to connect with young adults and draw them into lives of faith. Through Rethink Church messages, The United Methodist Church asks both seekers and the church as a whole to redefine the church experience as one that extends beyond the church doors to help transform the world. People seeking a church community can interact with the church through both digital and physical entry points to explore a life of faith.

As people receive these messages and act upon them, Rethink Church becomes a tool for churches and individuals to find new means to express faith, constitute Christian community and be the church. It revitalizes local churches and individuals who reach out to others and become engaged in meaningful change that expresses a life commitment to follow Jesus and make disciples for the transformation of the world.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the Rethink Church movement, contact RethinkChurch@umcom.org, call 877-281-6535 or go to www.RethinkChurch.org and umcom.org/rethinkchurch.

ENDNOTES

¹ UMC Steering Team Call to Action Report, 2010. http://www.umccalltoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/challenge/CTA_STEERING%20TEAM_%20RPT_1-44.pdf

² Rethink Church Campaign Survey conducted by the Barna Group for The United Methodist Church, 2009.

³ "Young Adult Seeker Study," Barna Group research study commissioned by United Methodist Communications, 2011.

⁴ *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*, by David Kinnaman, 2011.

⁵ "How Much Information?" a study conducted by the Global Information Industry Center at the University of California, San Diego, February 27, 2010. <http://hmi.ucsd.edu/howmuchinfo.php>

⁶ "Confidence in Leaders," Harris Interactive poll, 2008. <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/SearchResults.aspx?Search=confidence+in+leaders>

⁷ "The Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change," The Pew Research Center, 2010. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1501/millennials-new-survey-generational-personality-upbeat-open-to-new-ideas-technology-bound>

⁸ "Young Adult Seeker Study," Barna Group research study commissioned by United Methodist Communications, 2011

⁹ *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*, by David Kinnaman, 2011.

¹⁰ "The Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change," The Pew Research Center, 2010. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1501/millennials-new-survey-generational-personality-upbeat-open-to-new-ideas-technology-bound>

¹¹ Impact Community Western N.C. case study, United Methodist Communications

¹² Barna Local Markets Study, December 2011.

¹³ Impact Community Kalamazoo case study, United Methodist Communications

¹⁴ Impact Community Topeka case study, United Methodist Communications

¹⁵ Impact Community El Paso case study, United Methodist Communications

¹⁶ Impact Community Kentucky case study, United Methodist Communications