

Report to the 234th (2019) Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts from the 20s and 30s Task Force

Background

At Diocesan Convention in 2018, a resolution in response to Bishop Gates' Convention Eucharist address called for the creation of a task force to examine successful models of engagement of adults in their 20s and 30s within and beyond the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. The task force was charged to report its findings and recommendations during the 234th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.

This growing emphasis on the engagement of young adults comes at a very opportune time, as this work so closely aligns with the goals of our diocesan Mission Strategy. To build new models of engagement for new generations indeed calls us to “embrace brave change.” Much of what we have learned encourages us to consider ways to reimagine our congregations—and even to consider “extraparochial” models of building a community of faith. Likewise, both our process of inquiry and our early findings point to the importance of building relationships—across generations, across parishes, and across cultures. All of this, we feel, will equip us to engage our world in new and vibrant ways.

In December, the 20s/30s Task Force was formed under the direction of Bishop Gates and with the staff assistance of the Rev. H. Mark Smith, Diocesan Youth Missioner. From the outset, we saw our work as a complement to the commitment the diocese has already made to ongoing ministries focused on supporting young adults—the existing college chaplaincies and the Life Together Program—as well as communities such as The Crossing and CRECHE, neither of which is exclusively for young adults but by their natures tend to draw a younger crowd than most of our faith communities.

The task force (made up largely of people in their 20s and 30s) began our work in January 2019. We explored a variety of models for the engagement of young adults, organized into two working groups—one focusing primarily on researching existing models of success and the second interviewing young adults themselves. We looked at parishes that have or have had successful ministries with young adults. We also looked at emergent community models such as The Crossing and CRECHE. We looked at network models from New York, North Carolina, and Michigan. And, we interviewed a number of “unchurched” young adults to listen for their longings and desires. Over three dozen interviews were held across the diocese and beyond.

Our one-on-one interviewing was complemented by an online survey, *Spirituality and Religion in the Lives of Young Adults*, in an effort to expand both our sources of information and our network. The survey was available in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole. We received 131 responses from across the diocese, with respondents ranging from 18 to 40 years old.

In addition to our fact-finding activities, we hosted a breakfast meeting for about 90 young adults with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry during his visitation to the diocese, in partnership with the college chaplaincies. The breakfast with Presiding Bishop Michael

Curry highlighted the challenges that people in their 20s and 30s face in their spiritual journeys, and it underscored the need for the church's renewed engagement with them. We were pleased to hear that the Presiding Bishop was impressed and excited by the depth and passion that the young adults in attendance brought to the conversation.

In addition, a number of our members participated in *Uncharted: Episcopal and Lutheran Young Adult and Campus Ministry Leadership Conference*, held at Boston University June 19-22, 2019.

Throughout this work, we tried hard to resist the temptation to rush to design programs and instead organized our inquiry around the key questions we wanted to answer through this work. These questions encouraged deep reflection on the church and called us to reimagine the way we structure and pattern our life together, while helping us avoid the assumption that a new set of programmatic activities is always the solution. (See the appendix of this report for our organizing questions.)

Findings

What young adults ask for—authentic worship, deep connections, opportunities to make meaning, and genuine hospitality—is what so much of the church wants.

We heard and experienced among young adults a deep hunger to be seen, to be taken seriously, and to be given respect for the unique gifts that young adults bring to their communities. We heard a wish for the church to give itself permission to let go of “the glory days” and to deconstruct some of the myths around what the church was “back in the day.” We heard a desire for deep engagement and content, not just fellowship and another place to hang out. While we heard a longing for opportunities to meet the specific needs and desires of young adults, we also heard a desire not to be siloed off into young adult ministry groups. Many of us see our faith community as a chance for intergenerational relationships, learning, and support. Liturgically, young adults are not all looking for the same thing—no one style of liturgy or music is more or less appropriate to engaging young adults. No one wants to be pandered to.

Given how countercultural going to church or being religious is among young adults, the young adults who are in church rarely attend merely because they feel socially obligated to -- they *really* want to be there.

Recommendations

We follow Jesus, a young preacher whose radical welcome of all shook every institution he encountered. Young adult leaders are essential to our communities, in part because we have the capacity to reimagine what church could be. We, people in our 20s and 30s, have come of age in a period of profound sociological and technological change. Most importantly for the church, we have not inhabited a world where belonging to a faith community was expected. In general, young adults are among the least interested in institutional religion. And yet, we are here—here in our Church, in our diocese, in our parishes. We are here because we want to be here. We are here because we believe in the

Good News of Jesus and we want it to matter for our lives and for our world. This is the gift our generation has to offer the Church. Are we, the Church, ready to accept it?

We recommend that the Church, our diocese, and our parishes take action in five distinct areas in order to accept the challenge and gift of our generation.

Nurturing A Culture of Change

In order to engage people of all ages more fully in the life of the Church, we recommend that every congregation and ministry examine the ways in which they welcome newcomers, incorporate new members and identify and develop new leaders within our midst. Further, we recommend that each congregation and ministry examine the ways in which they raise up new leaders, or inhibit the elevation of new leaders. How do people find out how to get involved? Who is asked to lead, what roles are they offered, and how long do they have to wait to be asked? How do we mentor new leaders and help them succeed? What unintended barriers to full participation exist within our worshiping communities and diocesan structures?

For example, young adults generally tend to be more transient than older adults -- we move more frequently, are more likely to be starting or changing careers, or may be students in the midst of earning a degree. With this in mind, are there unspoken rules and underlying cultural expectations that make it challenging or impossible for young adults to belong and serve in our church communities? (“You need to wait a year before you can join the altar guild, because we want to make sure we know you well first.”) Are their expectations that young adults, because they are young, will want to work in youth ministry? How often do we listen to young adults and find out their ideas about ways to serve Christ through the church, rather than jumping to “assign” them to roles in structures already codified?

We encourage our diocesan family to be patient with the authentic growth of new relationships and new ways of being church. This work is about finding the courage to change our culture, not producing a program, a product, or a new brochure. Reimagination means being willing to distribute power in new ways, with new and different people. Embracing brave change means letting go of some old habits and customs to make room for innovative ways to celebrate our faith, creating new wineskins for new wine.

Christian Formation

Our peers shared with us a hunger for more substantive opportunities at the parish, regional, and diocesan levels to learn about the Christian life. We are not interested in empty fellowship or in being siloed away. In our mission strategy, our diocese committed to ensuring that “our young members receive the foundation they need to claim their faith into adulthood in an increasingly secular culture.” We recommend the creation of more events and classes designed by and for young adults (and others) and focused on formation through discernment, the study of the Bible and theology, and leadership development.

Building Relationships

In the course of this year, we invited our young adult peers to share their stories through one-on-one conversations and small gatherings. We recommend that this storytelling and listening work continue: within parishes and other worshipping communities, within deaneries and regions, and across the diocese to further connect young adults to one another and to potential mentors.

Recognizing that young adulthood is a time of transitions and change, we should look for ways to use our diocesan resources to better accompany young adults as we transition from phase to phase and from place to place.

We also recommend cultivating a network among existing and emerging young adult communities and ministries. Additional ways to build a stronger network among young adults include online platforms, group visits to parishes, and regional as well as diocesan-wide gatherings for learning and substantive conversations.

New Expressions of Christian Community

We belong to one of the most diverse generations in U.S. history and we believe our Anglican tradition is wide enough to hold that diversity. We discovered that the longings noted above—for warmer welcomes, deeper formation, authentic relationships, and opportunities to exercise our leadership—transcended liturgical preferences. Still, our experience tells us that most of our peers have not heard of the Episcopal Church and many have, at best, a skeptical view of all denominational structures.

We recommend experiments with gathering young adults in ways other than the parish model, including house churches, dinner churches, “pop-up” churches that create temporary communities in new spaces, and pilgrimages. We recommend these new expressions of Christian community not to replace the parish model and traditional forms of worship—many young adults continue to be drawn to these. However, there are many more young adults who we will never reach with the Good News of Christ without a creative new way of being The Body of Christ.

In addition, we recommend the development of a system of support to accompany, assess, and learn from these experiments, and to share those learnings widely.

Funding and Leadership

In order to support the implementation of these recommendations, we call for the creation of an ongoing Young Adult Ministry committee, made up of a diverse and representative group of leaders appointed by our Diocesan Bishop. The work of this committee would be funded as a core ministry of the diocese, and supported by a designated staff liaison.

This committee would:

- Develop strategies to help our diocese support existing young adult ministries and invest in new opportunities to reach young adults and build relationships.
- Strengthen young adult leaders through formation, leadership development, and the discernment of lay vocations.
- Cultivate communities of practice among existing and emerging young adult leaders and ministries.
- Encourage experimentation with new forms of Christian community and public witness.
- Work with others in our diocese to secure funding for innovative ways to witness to young adults in the public sphere.
- Communicate within and beyond the Church to raise awareness of the needs and gifts of young adults and to advocate for our leadership at all levels of our diocesan life and structures.

Respectfully submitted, September, 2019
20s and 30s Task Force
Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

Ms. Sarah Neumann, co-chair
The Rev. Suzanne Wade, co-chair

Ms. Chloe Abu-Jaber
The Rev. Dan Bell
Mr. Billy Boyce
The Rev. Katie Ernst
The Rev. Isaac Everett
Mr. Will Harron
The Rev. Greg Johnston
The Rev. Thea Keith-Lucas
The Rev. Shannon Kelly
The Rev. Isaac Martinez
The Rev. Angel Marrero
The Rev. Rita Powell
Ms. Lillian Randall
Mr. Max Sklar
The Rev. Tamra Tucker
Ms. Bridget Wood
Ms. Catie Woodbury
Ms. Bitsy Woodbury

The Rev. H. Mark Smith, staff liaison

Appendix

DIOMASS YOUNG ADULT TASK FORCE IDEAS

The 20s and 30s Task Force of the Diocese of Massachusetts held their launch meeting on Saturday, January 26, 2019. Following is a list of questions the group came up with that they hope their work would begin to answer. (Note that the questions are the result of a brainstorm and appear in no particular order.)

What is the *constellation* of models that are successful in engaging people in their 20s and 30s?

What does the church offer that is unique, that you can't get elsewhere?

What difference does it make that Jesus died?

Are young families also young adults?

How do we meet the needs of a population that lives in neighborhoods the Episcopal Church has left (South Boston, Allston/Brighton, ...)?

How do we keep the full diocese engaged in work that may be centered in urban centers (because that is where there is the largest concentration of people in their 20s and 30s)?

How do we support and engage young people in areas without a concentration of peers?

How do we as a task force model the new ways of being we are asking the church to live into?

How is diocesan funding supporting and not supporting what our diocese has stated as priorities?

How do we experiment in a system focused on track records of success and accountability?

How do we create places of leadership for young people?

How do we as a group engage queer, Latinx, Black, Asian people not represented here and in our church in ways that are relational and not divisive?

Who else is doing this work of successfully engaging people in their 20s and 30s? Who can we learn from? Do we dare look into people whose theology and values are different? Who we don't agree with?

What institutions are young people, who tend to be skeptical of institutions, engaged in? What do they need from the institutions with which they identify?

What are the points of failure we are blind to?

What do young people have to offer the church and how do we welcome that?

How are hiring and compensation practices in churches and the Diocese of Massachusetts oriented to engage or discourage hiring young people?

How can we as people in our 20s and 30s use our particular location in various roles to our advantage and to the advantage of others our age, without compromising our personal integrity?

What are the levers of cultural change?

How do we get older people to give up power? Are they willing to give up power?

How do we support young people engaged in the work of changing the culture to help them from becoming bitter?

How do we use different vehicles of communication for building community and doing ministry?

How can we be sure our recommendations are seen as “for the broader church,” not in competition with other needs?

What are the models for virtual and non-parish engagement for those not finding welcome?

Are there ways to engage young people and build communities that are providing them with what they need?

What should young adult groups do? Not do?

How do we change the culture so our communities see engaging with young people as good for church and not as good for young people only?

How can we help people see humans as humans? How can we not fall into the trap of perpetuating the habit of making sweeping assumptions about people?

Can there be non-parochial young adult groups/support? Who resources them?

How can we in our work maintain a focus on the broad needs of people in their 20s & 30s and not on only a narrow subset of the cohort?

How can we position our work to affect change in diocesan practice and not simply be a report that is forgotten or shelved?

How can we be sure to use language to encourage collaboration and not discord?

How do our institutional structures support broader engagement (or not)?

Why does it take so long to cease to be a “new person” in a parish/congregation? What practices do we have that are harmful to folding in new people?

How are we building relationships in our communities?

How can “caretaker vestries” move beyond thinking only about survival?

Can we stop whining about “the church that was” and its impending doom?

What sort of distorted truths have I believed into being, and how can I challenge them?