

Formation of the Next Generation

Summary: The Eastern Orthodox church's Syndesmos World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, Roman Catholic World Youth Days, and evangelical campus ministries are all efforts by Christian groups to counter the trend of young people turning away from religion. Many centrally organized youth groups host international gatherings to solidify community and invest in the future of the faith.

In 2015, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that a third of adults in their late twenties and early thirties do not identify with a religious tradition. For younger adults between the ages of 18 and 24, that figure is slightly higher: 36 percent. These “millennials,” who came of age after 2000, are twice as likely to be unaffiliated as baby boomers were at the same age four decades ago. Institutional churches and parachurch movements have, nevertheless, made concerted efforts to minister to young people, seeking to offer formative experiences through cultivating networks, fostering spiritual development, and responding to the challenges of growing up in the 21st century.

In many cases, outreach efforts to youth are organized by young people themselves and reflect a global consciousness. As early as 1953 a group of expatriate Eastern Orthodox youth gathered together in Paris, France, to build a “bond of unity” (in Greek, *syndesmos*) among all of the Orthodox youth movements around the world. In 1992, an organizing group by the name of Syndesmos proposed a World Day of Orthodox Youth, in which young people from communities around the world set aside the Feast of the Meeting of Our Lord in the Temple (a commemoration of the encounter of St. Simeon and St. Anna with the child Jesus) as a day to informally gather together and understand more of their tradition through study, fellowship, and prayer. Today, over sixty Orthodox youth movements from around the world are members of the Syndesmos World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth and general assemblies are held every four years.

Orthodox Christian Fellowship, a campus ministry of the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in North and Central America for more than a half a century, supports hundreds of chapters on campuses across the United States. Headquartered in Brookline, MA, a group of student advisors works alongside staff and an executive board to find innovative ways of connecting and engaging Orthodox young people on their campuses, efforts that include online resources and an annual conference.

Efforts like World Youth Days begin at an institutional level and invite students to take on leadership roles. In response to the United Nations declaring 1985 the “International Year of Youth,” the Vatican invited youth from around the world to spend days in Rome. As young people poured into St. Peter’s Square, their vitality and encounters with each other and with their faith, despite linguistic and cultural barriers, astounded the priests and bishops gathered with them. From this initial gathering, the concept of World Youth Days organically developed as an international gathering of Catholic youth in the spirit of pilgrimage to various locations every two to three years. Locations of World Youth Days have included Toronto, Canada (2002), Madrid, Spain (2011), and Kraków, Poland (2016). The largest attendance of 4 million pilgrims was recorded in Manila in the Philippines (1995). Organized into times for opening and closing Mass, catechesis, cultural events, the Stations of the Cross, and the night vigil with the Pope, many young people leave these events with a revitalized sense of the Catholic faith.

Evangelical Christian campus ministry efforts have also been global in scope. Two prominent examples includes Intersarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ (more recently known as “Cru”). Originally established by evangelical students in 1877 at the University of Cambridge, Intersarsity Christian Fellowship seeks to “establish witnessing communities” to grow in “love for God, God’s Word, and God’s people of every ethnicity and culture, and God’s purposes in the world.” The first group in the United States was established at the University of Michigan in 1938; Today, Intersarsity reaches 35,000 students in the United States alone at any one time. Every two to three years, a national conference is held in Urbana, Missouri, to inspire young people into global mission.

In 1951, Bill Bright founded Campus Crusade for Christ for university students at UCLA. In addition to expanding its geographic focus, the ministry has also expanded to include additional emphases, including high school, professional, family, and athletics. With a focus upon mission and evangelism, one of Campus Crusade’s most notable endeavors was The Jesus Film Project (1979), which was translated into 1,006 languages and shown in 228 nations. Currently, Campus Crusade for Christ has a consistent presence in 191 countries.

Mainline Protestants also provide young people with resources for growing in their faith through a range of campus ministry initiatives. Currently, Lutheran campus ministries are present on 180 state and private campuses across the nation with over 400 congregations cooperating in these efforts. The Lutheran Student Movement (LSM) attracts students from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

as well as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. LSM was formed in 1969 and at least one of its predecessor bodies was involved in the World Student Christian Federation since 1922, although the Federation itself was founded in 1895. Efforts to engage young people within the ELCA also include a tri-annual youth gathering which consistently gathers over 30,000 Lutheran high school students and adult companions from across the country. Presiding Bishop of the ELCA Mark Hanson offered his greetings at the 2012 Gathering in New Orleans, taking the opening session as opportunity to launch his very first Twitter account.

Collaborative efforts between mainline Protestant denominations are also common on college campuses like the Lutheran-Episcopal Chaplaincy at MIT. Extended, post-college services opportunities like the Episcopal Service Corps are additional ways in which young people are invited to explore questions of vocation. The Jesuit Volunteer Corps extend this model to an international level.

Teenagers and college students wrestle with many facets of their identity—and religion is often no exception. These struggles are especially complex among youth who are immigrants or who come from immigrant families. These young people may experience themselves on the margins of both their ethnic communities and the mainstream. Korean American youth, for example, may come from burgeoning and energetic Korean Christian churches where Korean still takes precedence over English as the language of worship and study. These experiences often lead to questions like: “How do my identities—Korean, American, and Christian—overlap or compete with one another?”

The experience of Korean immigrants in many ways repeats the experience of generations past. Both the “one-point-five” generation (those who immigrated as children) and the second generation have experienced what Will Herberg once called “double alienation.” They have grown up in English-speaking American schools and Korean-speaking immigrant families and churches. They often experience themselves as on the margins of both American and Korean cultures. They are unable and often unwilling to participate fully in the ethnic life of the Korean language churches of their parents. Yet bearing Korean names and a Korean family culture, they also experience a sense of marginalization from mainstream American culture and the life of its Protestant churches.

The Korean American United Methodist Youth Initiative represents one attempt to offer resources specifically for Korean high school youth. Founded by first generation Korean American Christians and

designed by second generation leaders, the Youth Initiative seeks to encourage young people to consider vocations in ministerial leadership. Participants also learn about the challenges of college from the testimonials of older student leaders.

On campus, ministries among immigrant communities often serve the purpose of faith formation, cultural transmission, and orientation. Many students involved in the Korean Christian Students' Association at Columbia University meet during the week for small group devotions. The resource is available in both English and Korean and is advertised on the group's website as especially good for "non-Christian newcomers" to the United States who wish to learn English. As a ministry associated with Campus Mission Church, the KCSA offers students the chance to connect with one another during retreats, holiday potlucks and newcomer welcoming events that take place during the time of Chusok, the Korean Full Moon Day.

Whether online, across campus, or around the world, young people continue to play a vital role in virtually all branches of Christianity. Efforts to support youth and youth-led initiatives are formative experiences today, and they are also investments in the future of the faith.