

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 reverse 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 American 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,” born in the 1980s and 1990s, are twice as likely to be unaffiliated as baby boomers were at the same age four decades ago, and the trend only seems to be accelerating in the younger “Generation Z.” In light of this reality, institutional churches and parachurch movements have made concerted efforts to minister to young people, seeking to offer formative experiences by 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 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. 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 gather together and deepen their connection to the 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, has for half a century supported 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 a few days in Rome. Young people poured into St. Peter’s Square, astonishing the priests and bishops with their passion, faith, and ability to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. From this initial gathering, the concept of World Youth Days organically developed into an international gathering of young Catholic pilgrims 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 a night vigil with the Pope, many young people leave these events with a revitalized sense of their Catholic faith.

Evangelical Christian campus ministry efforts have also been global in scope. Two prominent examples include InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ (more recently known as “Cru”). Originally established by evangelical students in 1877 at the University of Cambridge, InterVarsity 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, InterVarsity reaches tens of thousands of students in the United States each year. Every two to three years, the organization holds a national conference called Urbana to inspire young people into global mission.

In 1951, Bill Bright founded Campus Crusade for Christ for university students at UCLA. Since then, in addition to extending its geographic focus, the ministry has also expanded to include additional emphases, including high school, professional life, family, and athletics. With a focus on missions and evangelism, one of Campus Crusade’s most notable endeavors was The Jesus Film Project (1979), which was translated into 1,724 languages and shown in hundreds of nations. Currently, Cru has a consistent presence in almost 200 countries.

Mainline Protestants also provide young people with resources for growing in their faith through a range of campus ministry initiatives, often organized denominationally. Lutheran campus ministries, for example, are currently present on 180 state and private college 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 had been involved in the World Student Christian Federation (founded in 1895) since 1922. 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. The Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Mark Hanson, offered his greetings at the 2012 Gathering in New Orleans, taking the opening session as an 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. Post-college service opportunities like the Episcopal Service Corps are additional ways in which young people are invited to explore questions of vocation. The Jesuit Volunteer Corps extends this model to an international level, attracting Catholics and other young Christians alike.

Teenagers and college students wrestle with many facets of their identity—and religion is no exception. These struggles are especially complex among youth who are immigrants or who come from immigrant families. Korean American youth, for example, may grow up in English-speaking schools and Korean-speaking homes and churches. Some may be unable or unwilling to participate fully in the life of their parents' churches, in which Korean is the language of worship and study. Yet bearing Korean names and a Korean family culture, they may also experience a sense of marginalization from mainstream American culture and the life of its Protestant churches. These experiences often lead to questions like: “How do my identities—Korean, American, and Christian—overlap or compete with one another?”

The Korean American United Methodist Youth Initiative represents one attempt to offer resources for Korean high school students. 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. It also offers younger students opportunities to be mentored by 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. These small groups are available in both English and Korean and are 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 Korean Full Moon festival called Chuseok.

Whether online, on 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 cultivating formative experiences today, and they are also investments in the future of the faith.