

Case Study

Intergenerational University Campus Ministry The University Parish Newman Center, Kent State University

(Website: <http://kentnewmancenterparish.org/about>)

In a recent conversation with a young adult who is a classic spiritual seeker, I asked him what his ideal church would look like. He began describing it and part way through his description it dawned on him that he was describing the University Parish Newman Center that serves Kent State University in Ohio. He wasn't describing a typical campus ministry. This isn't a Catholic college where students typically interact with other students in the campus ministry programs. This is also not a typical Newman Center at a public university that is also primarily populated by college students. The University Parish Newman Center at Kent is a full intergenerational parish that intentionally integrates college students into the full life of the parish providing ample opportunities for college students and non-student parishioners to minister side-by-side. While the rest of the church is wringing its hands as it ponders what to do with college age young adults, the Newman Center at Kent has cracked the code.

Hospitality to Young Adults

Mary Lynn Delfino, the Pastoral Associate for Campus Ministry, oversees the effort to incorporate college students into parish life and ministries. Expressing care through a generous spirit of hospitality is the foundation of their success. While all parishes experience members that come and go, the transient nature of college life amplifies the turnover rate of members at this church. University parishes have to be outstanding at hospitality because they are welcoming a significant percentage of new members every year when the new freshman class arrives in late August! One thing that becomes clear immediately to new freshmen when they walk into the Newman Center is that they are not going to be treated as outsiders. They are accepted as full members of the parish and they are invited repeatedly to participate in all parish programs and ministries.

Eating Well

This will come as no surprise... food is a key to bringing the generations together! The parish hosts breakfasts and dinners for the whole parish once or twice per month during the semesters. College students and older adults staff the kitchen and serve the food. Non-student church members attend and enjoy the meal. The breakfasts and dinners are often connected to a fundraising effort for a local charity. Delfino uses opportunities like these to match students with adults who might become mentors. For example, if she knows a student is a nursing major, she'll introduce the student to an older parishioner who is working in the nursing field.

Ready! Set! Cook! is another food-based program that brings the generations together. Older church members teach college students how to cook simple meals that they can prepare in their residence halls or apartments. Spontaneous gift-giving erupted as a result of the warm relationships that developed through the program. Learning from each other, engaging in meaningful conversations and eating together build bonds that are the lifeblood of a thriving church.

Mixing the Generations Intentionally

This parish, like most churches, has a Christian education program for children. Ninety percent of the teachers are college students. Most of them are education majors. Opportunities for intergenerational relationship building abound. They are not only getting to know the children of the parish, but they are also in a position to develop meaningful relationships with their parents. High school youth ministry is also intentionally connected to the college programming and the adult programming at the parish.

Frequently, the mix of college student members and non-student members is about equal. All liturgical ministries, including liturgy coordinator, are open to college students and about half of the liturgical ministers are college students. The Newman Center offers an annual whole-church retreat. Again, about half of the participants are college students. They have the opportunity to nurture their spiritual lives while mixing with other generations from the church. Some retreat activities are designed to pair up older church members with college students to foster intergenerational relationships and to share spiritual wisdom across the generations. Another program that has about equal numbers of college students and older members is the immersion trip to El Salvador. The church has a sister church and they also support a school. Deep intergenerational friendships are forged as the participants travel together and explore a different culture in the context of faith formation.

Three years ago, a student proposed a prayer partner experience during Lent. Mary Lynn mentored her through the program planning process. The result was that college students and non-student church members were paired together to help each other fulfill their prayer goals during the season of Lent. Mary Lynn encouraged the prayer partners by reminding them that their prayer was not only a benefit to their personal spiritual lives, but it was also a blessing to the church as a whole and to the world. This prayer partner program continues and is now coordinated by another student.

Mary Lynn Delfino has observed how intergenerational ministry has produced spiritual transformations in all church members. The warm and welcoming spirit of the non-student members is a key to this church's success. Hospitality to young adults is a core value of this church. They even design their church calendar around the academic calendar to signal to the college students that they matter. The University Parish Newman Center at Kent is a remarkable example of how to powerfully and successfully reach out to college age young adults.