

# New Beginnings

A Success in Reaching Younger African Americans

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The absence of young people in our congregations is a perplexing problem. Many youth and children's programs are overflowing; yet when these youngsters reach late adolescence and young adulthood, they are "missing in action" in many churches. We have to do more than add programs and ministries to young people. We must do more than preach at and condemn young people. We can no longer be content to wait until they get older to experience God and come back to church. We are called, indeed compelled, to help all people feel there is a place for them in our churches and work for them to do.

It is more than wanting to fill our church pews, or wanting young persons to be represented in our membership, or wanting innovative, creative programs for youth and young adults. The understanding that the gospel must be preached to every generation is at the core of our quest to reach youth and young adults. There is a gnawing realization that we have failed to pass the torch to the next generation, that we have destined the church to extinction. Indeed, the very future of the church is at stake.

## A New Church

I am privileged to be pastor of an initiative of the Baltimore-Washington Conference called New Beginnings UMC. New Beginnings was chartered in 2003 with 150 members, 90 percent under 30. We strive to create an atmosphere of ministry and worship that is welcoming to young people and that allows them to participate fully in the life of the church.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of New Beginnings' ministry is the inclusion of young people in leadership. We have all the traditional UMC committees, each is made up of mostly young people. In fact, most are chaired by persons less than thirty years old. These young people feel ownership in the church and its ministries, not just because they are ministered to, but because they have a part in the process of creating what the church looks like.

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For example, we partner with local community organizations to collect and distribute food once a week. A young person drives the truck to pick up the food and helps to organize the distribution of the food in the community. He reports back to the Leadership Team, but controls the hands-on operation of the ministry. We have a young person who leads the church's prayer ministry. Technically, she is a lay pastor, responsible for ministering to assigned members of the church through prayer. Her gift of discernment and her call to ministry are obvious as she provides leadership in this area. Another young person is gifted in administration. She is responsible for keeping the membership records of the church. We provided her with training in record keeping and use of our computer software and then allowed her to "do her own thing" within established parameters. She

communicates with the treasurer and provides accurate reports on a monthly basis. These young people make it clear you do not have to be over forty to be a church leader.

I meet monthly with several young people who feel called to ministry and have experienced dreams, visions, and other

manifestations of the Holy Spirit in their lives. We discuss their gifts and callings, to help them discern God's will for their future and to provide a safe place for exploration of their dreams and visions. I believe in troubled times God often communicates to God's people in dramatic ways. This mentoring may or may not result in acceptance of a call to ordained ministry or other commitments to the ministries of church. However, I am sure it will result in a continuing relationship with God in each young person's life. Each person who has been mentored will help others along the way to embrace Jesus Christ and continue on the discipleship journey.

## What Turns Young People Off?

When I talk with young people across the country, their number one problem with the church is the lack of genuine integrity among pastors and others in spiritual authority. We live in a world where the indiscretions of public figures are broadcast nationally in a continual loop and where condemnation from church leadership and other "moral" figures is often swift and judgmental. Young people often see the church's stance as hypocritical when they know their own pastors and spiritual leaders have no integrity.

The second issue young people have with the church is our blatant disregard and disrespect of their leadership abilities and their spirituality. Why is it we feel that anyone under forty has no deep connection with the Spirit? Why is it we feel that one must pay one's dues to be a church leader? In our technological age, many young people are more qualified to lead in certain areas than those who have been around for a long time.

Young people are also turned off by the church's seemingly constant focus on money. They are not naïve enough to believe that the church can run without money. But they see our focus on the money—sometimes to the exclusion of ministry—to be antithetical to what we say we believe.

Finally, young people often are disgusted with our insistence on doing church the way we have always done it. There is new technology; there are new ways of presenting the old, old story; and at times, the church acts like a time capsule buried in the sand, to be resurrected at Christ's return, to look just like it did when we began.

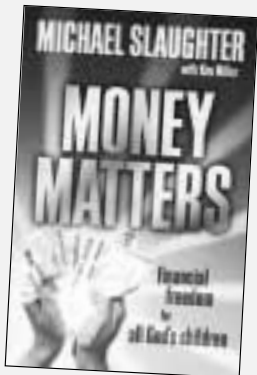
There is good news! Contrary to popular belief, young people have not given up on the church. In fact, at New Beginnings and in many other United Methodist churches throughout our connection, youth people are working in their churches, answering the call to ministry, interpreting Scripture, worshiping God, and making disciples. Our responsibility is to join them on the journey, and wish them well.



Cynthia Belt is pastor of New Beginnings United Methodist Church in Severn, Maryland.

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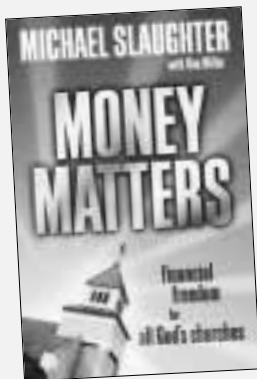
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