

Background Information

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Assemblies of God General Superintendent states that a ratio of 2:3 evangelical young people attending secular colleges or universities abandons their Christian faith (Wood 2006, 15). Based on information obtained from Assemblies of God (AG) church statistics, it is estimated that in the next five years approximately seventy five percent of AG young adults will attend a secular university. In contrast, approximately five percent of the young people who attend AG colleges will leave their faith. The Barna Group's research indicates that although six out of ten teens participate in some form of faith activity, they appear to disengage when they become "twenty some-things" (Barna 25 January, 2006).

There are approximately 42,834,000 young adults in the United States (www.collegebound.net). They will become community leaders, educators, law makers, and guardians for the next generation. It is important that the Christian community has an effective strategy for reaching them with the gospel and helping them to integrate a Christian worldview.

Through interviews, the researcher discovered that in the Pennsylvania Delaware District of the Assemblies of God (PDD), it is estimated that less than thirty percent of the churches are actively targeting young adults. There are more than 650,000 students on the 250 college and university campuses of the district (www.collegebound.net). Chi Alpha (XA) is the AG para-church ministry outreach to the secular campus. They have discipleship resources and a presence on an estimated 225 campuses nationwide. They work on six campuses in Pennsylvania and Delaware. Its goal is to reach the student with the gospel, make disciples, and train students how to live out their faith in the market place. It is not likely that Chi Alpha would be able to supply a

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sufficient number of missionaries to minister on the many college campuses of Pennsylvania. However, the fact that there are so many Assemblies of God churches in the PDD would appear to provide a viable solution to the tremendous need in contrast to the small number of Chi Alpha missionaries.

Background to the Nature of the Problem

According to information gathered from district officials, the majority of the 350 churches in Pennsylvania do not have a strategy to reach young adults. Reaching the young adult (whether student or worker) over the last several decades has not been a dominant theme in the district. Steve Tourville, the PDD Superintendent (personal communication, September 2006), voiced his desire to see change in the area of reaching college aged young people. He has seen Chi Alpha missionaries come and go through the years. He is disturbed by the number of colleges and universities in Pennsylvania that are not being targeted. Reverend Tourville is hopeful for change in the area of reaching young adults with the gospel.

Tom Rees, district XA Liaison and Assistant to the District Superintendent, shared that there are large numbers of colleges and universities in Pennsylvania which has comparatively few XA workers. Historically, in places where there were XA workers, they tended to run parallel to the local churches which did not lend to long term productive ministry (personal communication, September 2006). The result of which meant that when the missionary moved on, the campus ministry would close down. Presently there are three (one couple and one woman), Chi Alpha missionaries ministering in PDD. They are relatively new to the district and as such have not had the opportunity to produce long term results.

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The Nature of the Problem

The nature of the problem is that churches of the PDD are seeing young adults disengage from the local church. It is estimated that nearly forty percent will not find their way back to the local church nor remain in the Christian faith (Wood 2006, 15). Some believe that the loss of university students to the world has always been the case which makes this generation no different from the previous ones. As Barna (2001) explains it, “we sometimes prefer the problem we know to the solution we don’t” (18). In this case the problem is how to impact the young adults in the local church. Those who disengage from the faith are bombarded with the worldview handed to them by professors, media, and peers. Carroll (2002) explains that “Christianity is a worldview that challenges many core values of secular society and addresses the deepest questions and concerns” (60). Often the local AG church does not appear to be an effective communicator of the gospel to the young adult. As Kallenberg (2002) suggests, “We do not do as the missionaries who become students of their host culture so they can discover how God’s Spirit intends the gospel to become embodied in the new era” (13). It appears that the church lets the young adult disengage for a while and hope they return to the church and faith. This generation of young adults does not appear to be finding its way back either to the local church or to their faith.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study will be to develop strategies and paradigms for reaching and retaining young adults with the gospel of Christ through the context of the local church. Interviews with pastors who are successfully reaching young adults will provide workable models for the PDD context. It is anticipated that interviews with pastors who are currently not reaching this age group will reveal felt, expressed, and anticipated needs. The data collected from those who are ministering and those who are not will provide information on the comparative needs in the district. The findings from pastors will be set against the backdrop of information gathered from literature and interviews with those working in the field.

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