

2024 University and Young Adult Chaplain's Report to Convention The Rev. Dan Isadore

2024 has been a year of growth and fast-pace for the University and Young Adult Chaplaincy in the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh. But before I get into that, I'd like to share several studies on generation Z, which is predominately the demographic that I work with on a daily basis. I believe these studies will both help to inform the reader on why and how my family and I spend our time engaging in ministry in the way that we do.

Generation Z (the generation of which current university students are a part) is the least religious generation in American history. In 2020, data showed that out of every possible religious affiliation amongst Gen Z, only 20% attend their respective religious services on a weekly basis. Just to clarify: that's not 20% of those who identify as Christians; that's 20% of those who identify with *any* religion. And only 6% of Gen Z identify as mainline Protestants. (<https://religioninpublic.blog/2021/07/19/generation-z-and-religion-the-most-recent-data/>)

Furthermore, this data was collected in 2020, prior to the pandemic, meaning that attendance has dropped even lower since that time, as studies have shown (<https://research.lifeway.com/2022/11/08/churches-are-open-but-still-recovering-from-pandemic-attendance-losses/>). Needless to say, our churches are not filled with young people who go away to college looking for a group of people with whom to worship. In such a context, how does one (in the words of my position description)“ share the truth of the Gospel and the love of Jesus Christ” in such a context?

While Episcopal students seeking to be a regular part of Episcopal churches or Episcopal ministries virtually do not exist, and even Christian students seeking a church or ministry are few and far between, there is no shortage of young people, both on campus and off, who are curious about God, religion, and spirituality. Generally speaking, however, those students aren't going to come to the church; the church must go to them.

Take it from Relevant Magazine: “If the Church truly wants to reverse its trend of decline, the answer lies not in coddling Gen Z nor in inviting them to join. It lies in going to where they are and taking part in the work they're already doing. The real secret for the Church will be learning that their mission is not simply to shape Gen Z, but also to be shaped by them. That takes a level of humility that might involve some growing pains but, hey, at least there will be growing.” (<https://relevantmagazine.com/magazine/how-gen-z-will-shape-the-church/>)

How does this work on a university campus? Quite literally by going to students. The first task is to identify a student, or a group of students, to connect with, get to know, learn from, and care for. This can't be done to get them to believe, think, do or join anything. It must be done, rather, simply because they are human beings whom Jesus loves. My education and experience has taught me that what can happen when you adopt this posture toward others is that trust

can form, and people begin to open up their lives up to you. When you care for them, and for no reason other than because they are people created to be loved, it can serve as an entrance into the life of that person.

That's why this approach of caring without any alternative motive must be where we not only start, but end. People, younger and older alike, are not a means to an end. They must *never* be treated as objects for us to impose agendas upon or enlist in a cause. Human beings are ends in themselves, and to be served as such. Jesus *died* rather than treat us otherwise; He gave His life to treat us as an end.

However most people, students included, are not treated this way. Typical human interactions consist of relating to someone else "in order to ____" (fill in the blank). In the church, this blank is often filled in by phrases such as: "save them," "get them to public worship," "get them to become church members," "get them involved in social justice," or "get them to give their money." None of these ways of filling in that blank communicate "the truth of the Gospel," or "the love of Jesus Christ."

Jesus, on the other hand, does not treat us this way. He treats us according to who we are: those who bear His image, and who ought to be treated as having unsurpassable worth. Jesus fills in that blank with "in order to *love them*." As Anglican Samuel Wells puts it so well in *A Nazareth Manifesto*, "Time with others - time that is not inherently purposeful, goal-oriented, and solution-seeking - is not wasteful, indulgent, neglectful or worthless; it is, on the contrary, the goal of creation, the telos of humanity, and the vision of God" (62).

Gen Z is not only the least religious generation America has ever seen; they are also the loneliest. Here's Relevant Magazine once more: "In 2018, a Cigna study found that Gen Z is easily the loneliest generation of Americans. 46 percent of Americans feel lonely some of the time, but that number climbs up to 69 percent with Gen Z. Moreover, 68 percent of Gen Z feel like nobody knows them well. That lack of connection can't be met by a brand, a corporation or even an institution. But it can be met by people who reach out to them with empathy, love and understanding" (<https://relevantmagazine.com/magazine/how-gen-z-will-shape-the-church/>).

This is confirmed by the Surgeon General's 2023 report, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation." (<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>) And Pittsburgh just happens to be the sixth loneliest city in America. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/loneliest-cities-in-america-chamber-of-commerce-report/>) I contend that by treating students as an end in themselves, as Jesus does and commands, we combat both the religious and the "relational poverty" that plagues this generation. And when students experience this kind of care, they often become curious as to why someone would go out of their way to act toward them in this manner. And that's how opportunities begin to open up to bear a more focused witness to Jesus through means such as Bible study, prayer, worship, and book studies.

Students need to experience the kind of life that is being offered before they express any interest in listening to an explanation about it, and certainly prior to developing a desire to commit to it themselves. They need to see what faith in Jesus looks like, and particularly how it forms a person to engage in the world and relate to others, before they can even conceive of further exploring this life of faith in Christ. They need to be presented with an alternative way of life that is more beautiful than what they currently have before they become open to the possibility of changing their patterns of behavior, let alone the orientation of their lives.

And this takes time. *A lot* of time. And energy. And initiative. And resources. And discomfort. It's a very slow, thankless, invisible process. But even though it's difficult, it's not complicated. It consists simply of showing up in people's lives, in appropriate ways, to see and listen to them, to respect them, to forgive them, to encourage them, and to *cherish* them. My experience has been that when you do this consistently, and for the sole reason that it is what Jesus wants us to do, it opens up spaces for Jesus to do what no one else can. This is what I've seen happen during the time I've been on campus over the past year. It's been beautiful and I'm grateful to be a part of it.

After working very hard for five months just to get on campus, I have spent the vast majority of my time over the last year simply being present and getting to know students who make up one student group in a variety of ways. I attend regular group meetings and events in order to connect with the students on a personal level. Those connections almost always lead to me inviting students to conversation around coffee or a meal. Those conversations consist of a lot of me asking them questions, listening, respecting, forgiving, encouraging and appreciating the students, which opens up opportunities for future invitations, conversations and an ever-deepening sharing in their lives.

As a result, just about every student who regularly attends the group has also joined us in our home for a meal with my family, whether with a larger group of students, on their own, or with a friend. Because of the consistent way that I care for these students, each of these relationships has already included conversations around God, faith, religion and spirituality, conversations that have gone in many different directions. Some of the students are not Christian, and not interested in following Jesus, but value our relationship and the support that I provide. I consider it a privilege that they want to continue our relationship, and I include them in my prayers. Some of my students are Christian, and have a church; some are satisfied with their church, and some are not; I consider it, again, a privilege that they continue our relationship, and I pray for them. And some students are either Christian and don't have a church, or aren't Christians and have a lot of questions. Some of this group are more open and trusting; some are not as trusting and are more guarded. I have to respect them where they are, and walk with them there. These, too, are included in those for whom I pray.

It's evident to me that Jesus is already in the life of *each* student with whom I have a relationship. However, it is also clear to me that He is also already opening some doors to further opportunities to bear witness to Him. Over the past year, I have been invited by

students to attend three other groups on campus. That means that this next year instead of just one student group I will have *five* where I can meet and connect with students. Over the past year I also connected with students from the University of Duquesne and Slippery Rock University, each with their own groups on campus, meaning that I will have access to *three* campuses instead of just one, and to *seven* total student groups.

More particularly, one of the students at the University of Pittsburgh, who met with me every 1-2 weeks throughout last academic year, was inspired by her conversations with me to start a new student group called Facing Faith. The purpose of this student group is to provide open space for *all* students, whether religious or not, to come together on a weekly basis to ask questions, express struggles, voice doubts and share perspectives regarding God, faith, spirituality and religion. It's meant to be an inclusive space where no decisions are required other than a willingness to listen to others who are also working through these matters. What will this group become? Will it be a success? What would "success" look like? Will it maintain its focus? Will it grow? What does Jesus want for this group? I don't yet know. What I do know is that this new endeavor was *initiated by a student* with whom I have a relationship, and who wants me to be a part of the group. She also expressed that she wants me to connect with the students who attend this group just as I've connected with her and with others. To me, this means more access to more students, and, most importantly, more occasions to ascribe to students the unsurpassable worth that Jesus ascribes to them.

Another one of my students is a veteran who is attending Pitt on the GI bill. He is beginning to explore Jesus, and he's interested in some form of Christian community, even though he's not yet committed to one. He has a passion for helping other veterans, as he knows how difficult it can be as a veteran making a transition to attending university. He is now the president of the Pitt veterans' student club, and he has requested that I help him with the group in some capacity. As a non-traditional, older student, I have also invited him to be a part of our small-group young adult study at our home where we are working through James Bryan Smith' *The Good and Beautiful God* together. Again, what will come of this relationship, or this study? What will it mean for me to serve that group of student veterans? Will I, in fact, receive that opportunity? How will it work out? I don't know. But this student wants me to accompany him on his journey, and he wants to introduce me to the broader veteran population at Pitt, because he values the way that I have treated him, as well as our conversations about Jesus and the Bible.

I have also gotten to the point this year in my relationships with students in general that I can invite each of them to read through the Bible with me, using *The Message Remix: Pause*, which is a Bible that is delightful to read and allows you to read at your own pace. I have made, and will continue to make, this invitation to each student I meet, and I hope to have both individual and group conversations around the Bible as a result.

These are just a few examples of what Jesus is doing through the Chaplaincy in the last year. This is only a snap shot; He is doing promising things in the lives of each of the students to whom I minister as a chaplain, and it would take pages upon pages to detail.

I believe that what I spend my time doing as University and Young Adult Chaplain is the way the church should be engaging the GenZ+ generation that is conspicuously absent not just from our churches, but from the church as a whole. I believe it's also the way to go about addressing the loneliness epidemic, which is perhaps the greatest societal need of our time. And God is blessing the effort. Thank you for contributing to this work in the many ways that you do. Please continue to pray that Jesus would strengthen, sustain, and encourage me for this work to which we have been called.