RS-672: TACKLING THE ISSUE: RETAINING YOUNG PEOPLE IN US CONGREGATIONS

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No specified office hours for online course.

Course Description:

“Why are there so few teens and young adults active in this congregation? What can we do?” This is a very familiar plaint of leaders and members of churches, mosques and synagogues in the United States. For high school, college and graduate students, studies have found that attending congregational worship and programs has a positive effect on their academic motivation, overall health, avoidance of alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors. Successes and difficulties in retaining youth and young adults are also of central importance for the health of congregations and their denominations, educational institutions, and associations.

Many articles, books, and online reports have been published in the last decade on why young people’s religiosity has declined and what might be done. Still, the search for answers continues unabated. Research findings and reflections on what young people are “like” now, ways to engage and keep them involved in worship, religious classes, and mission projects have been published in 2017, 2018 and are forthcoming in 2019-2020. This course will explore theory and research on these issues through lectures, reading, weekly questions for students’ online discussion, and a final paper.

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

Course Design:
The first half of the course is more theoretical, and the second half is more focused on applying concepts and findings to strengthening youth and young adults’ faith commitments. In this graduate level course, the reading assigned is intended to give students an overview of what is “known”, published, on young people’s degree of religious involvement, along with theories, programs, and future perspectives. Lectures and reading will include studies published very recently, such as:

- The Age Gap in Religion around the World: “By several measures young adults tend to be less religious than their elders: the opposite is rarely true”. Conrad Hackett, Stephanie Kramer, Anna Schiller. Pew Research Center. 2018 (June).
Weekly reading will usually include a lecture (of several pages) and other assigned reading primarily to help students gain understanding of themes and trends (not historical or statistical details). Major concepts and findings of these readings will be reviewed in lectures, but often important details will be up to students to read and reflect on. Students are NOT expected to read those articles that include many tables of numbers, however. Very empirical articles will be summarized in lectures, and for those interested, usually available for download under a category called “New Empirical Studies.”

Learning Goals: Over the semester students are encouraged and expected to take theories, concepts or findings discussed in the course, and comment: (1) on how these relate (or do not) to involvement of young people in the faith community the student knows best; (2) or, on whether methods discussed for energizing congregational involvement of youth and “emerging adults” would likely be more effective for those of particular religious upbringing, family culture, or gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment. Reading, reflecting and writing on such comparisons can assist students’ meeting all 5 of the MA Learning Outcomes, especially: #3 and #5.

- #3. To demonstrate knowledge and of practices of one’s own religious tradition and the capacity to appreciate the practices of other faith traditions.
- #5. To demonstrate the ability to relate theory and practice in the social contexts in which a religion’s communities exist.

The final essay will be the artifact collected by the registrar at the end of the course, and should exemplify Learning Outcome #5.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Each weekly lecture will be followed by discussion questions posed by the instructor. The discussion questions generally ask how applicable the weekly reading material has been for the students’ own experience and what they would add, critique, or question. Students’ weekly responses can provide a basis for developing a proposal for and completion of their final essay. Students are given points for their responses to the lecture question, and academic grades for the midterm proposal, the final essay and course overall.

- Weekly: Complete the assigned reading; answer one of the questions posed by the instructor with each lecture, and comment on at least one of the answers written by another student. 40% of final grade
- Mid-term proposal for final essay: 800-1000 words on your proposed subject and approach on a final paper for this course. 15% of final grade
- Final essay: About 4,500 or more words (15 pages double-spaced) on what you see or propose for the future of young people’s involvement in your congregation, teenage or young adult group, denomination, or other faith community -- AND WHY (using your scholarly reflections, assigned readings, interviews, insights, and hopes.) 45% of final grade

ALL READING ASSIGNED WILL BE AVAILABLE ON–LINE
COURSE SESSION I: THEORIES ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE AND RELIGION

MODULE 1: Introduction to Religious Views and Participation of Young People

1. **Reading:** Only the on-line lecture
2. **Students:** Introduce themselves to the class, and give some information about their backgrounds, and what their particular interests are in this course or for careers.

MODULE 2: The Generational Types and Religion


    **Empirical Study:** Not required reading


MODULE 3: Emerging Adults in Different Familial, Religious and Cultural Contexts


    **Empirical Study:** Not required reading

    - Jaimee Stuart, “A Qualitative analysis of Muslim young adults’ adaptation experiences in New Zealand.” *Journal of Muslim Mental Health.*
MODULE 4: Families and Young People's Religious Involvement


3. Empirical Studies: Not required reading

MODULE 5: Importance of the Teenage Years in Faith Formation


   Empirical Study: Not required reading
MODULE 6: Importance of the College Years in Faith Stability and Change


   **Empirical Study:** Not required reading

MODULE 7: Young Adults: Religious “Nones” or Spiritual Independents?


   **Empirical Studies** (not required reading)
MODULE 8: Seeking a Spiritual Identity and a Faith Community

3. Mike Hayes, Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20’s and 30’s (New York, Paulist Press, 2007), Chapter 1. “Identifying Young Adults: Would you know a young adult if you fell over one in the aisle?” pp. 3-24.

MODULE 9: Catch up reading week, and proposal

There will be more information about the final essay. No other reading or web posting is required. Instead, students should ensure that their 800+ word proposal for their final essay is emailed to the instructor by the end of the week or very soon thereafter.

COURSE SECTION II: CONGREGATIONS: ATTRACTING AND KEEPING YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

MODULE 10: Perplexing: Developing “Sustainable” Congregational Programs for Teenagers

1. Mark DeVries, Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why most youth ministry doesn’t last and what your church can do about it. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2008.)
2. (More forthcoming)

MODULE 11: More Challenging: Attracting and Keeping Young Adults Involved with Congregations

1. Monte Sahlin and David Roozen. Chapter 1: “A Profile of Congregations with Significant Young Adult Participation”. Pp. 11-24 (Sahlin and Roozen…. How Religious Congregations are Engaging Young Adults in America. (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, 2015).
5. (More forthcoming)
MODULE 12: There will be a selection of congregational case studies provided, which are trying to have youth and young adult programs. Students will be asked to choose one or more to read and comment on.

MODULE 13: Pulling Together as an Age-Diverse Congregation

Spring Reading Week: (No Seminary classes)

MODULE 14: Summary Lecture & Final Essay. No reading or web posting required of students. Final Essay, 4,500 words, about 15 pages double-spaced is due on or before May 25(?).