
EXAMINING THE INTERPLAY OF CHURCH AND FAMILY IN CULTIVATING THE FAITH IN TEENAGERS TOWARDS A NEW STRATEGY

Daniel Slivka* and Kamil Kardis

University of Prešov in Prešov, Greek-Catholic Theological Faculty, Department of Historical Sciences and Department of Philosophy and religious Studies, st. bishop Gojdič 2, 080 01 Prešov, Slovak Republic

(Received 22 August 2017, revised 23 January 2018)

Abstract

The stability and continuity of the Church rely on its ability to nurture and bring up young people in the way of faith. Young people represent a great percentage of the general population, and this should be the case in the Church. However, there is an unfortunate trend in the Church today, where a large number of young people are increasingly becoming disenchanted with the Church. The massive exodus of teenagers, mainly between the ages of 17-19, raises concern on how the Church will function with only young children and elders. The shrinking of the Church begins with reduced number of young people who are supposed to take the mantle of the elderly and pass it on to the coming generations. This study explores various reasons that contribute to the mass exodus of teenagers from the Church and evaluates strategies that can be used to curb this phenomenon.

Keywords: ecumenism, parents, teenagers, dialogue, faith

1. Introduction

Young people represent the Church of tomorrow while at the same time they play an instrumental role in strengthening the church communities as the visible body of Christ today. Having all age groups in Church (old, middle-aged and young people) represents the completeness of the Church and when one group is underrepresented, the Church has to ask itself questions about what it is doing wrong. In the contemporary world that is marred by high media influence, increased crime rate, many natural calamities, and many inhuman activities perpetrated by different groups, it is important to make sure that all Church members have unwavering faith in God, lest they fall [1]. Despite the perceived need for growth in faith and solid focus on Jesus at present, the faith of some

*E-mail: daniel.slivka@unipo.sk

parts of the Church, mainly teenagers, is slowly fading away and if this is not addressed the Church will be only one generation away from its fall.

A research carried out by Lifeway (a major Christian resource centre and publisher in the USA) about the youth drop out in Church indicated that 70% of teenagers will either become totally disenchanted about their faith, or they will become inactive in Church before graduating from college or high school [2]. The findings of this research support the findings by a study carried out in USA indicating that 40% of the eighth grade students leave the Church (just or before becoming teenagers), 70% of the female teenagers drop out of Church after graduating from high school, and 90% male students drop out of Church after graduating from high school [Barna Group, *4 Tough Aspects of Spiritual Growth*, Barna Research, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth#.UoP7pChER8s>]. This is an alarming trend, which points out to the challenges experienced by the modern Church in ensuring that the word of God be taught to everybody in the language and manner that they can understand [3]. Church attendance in USA, as it is in other parts of the world, is slowly following the trend in Britain where only 6% of the population attend the Church, with more than 1500 Churches closed since 1969 [4]. Lack of spiritual growth among most teenagers is related to increased school violence coupled with decreased academic performance [5]. Most teenagers are either leaving Church altogether, or they are exploring other channels to satisfy their spiritual needs. The Barna Group exposes the gravity of this matter by revealing that more than 60% of all the young adults attending the Church in their teens ultimately become disengaged spiritually at some point in their twenties. Understanding the depth of this matter will be instrumental in reversing this trend and ensuring that young people are feeling more satisfied at Church [<https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth#.UoP7pChER8s>].

2. Are the teenagers falling out of the Church or the faith?

Given the alarming trend that indicates that a high number of teenagers are leaving the Church, it is paramount to consider the reason for their leaving: (1) are they getting disconnected from a given Church or congregation or (2) are they falling out of faith? Despite the high rate of teenagers' exodus from Church, research points out the fact that most teenagers tend to leave their Church or congregation but not their faith. The Barna Group categorises the teenagers who drop out of the Church into three categories: (1) exiles, (2) nomads and (3) prodigals. Like the parable of the prodigal son, prodigals are teenagers who were once profound Christians have since lost their faith in God [6]. This is an assemblage of young individuals who used to profess Christian faith but later they identified other sources of spiritual nourishment. Some of the young people who leave Christian faith join other religions or become atheists. The best news

is that this is the smallest group of teenagers comprising only one out of nine of the total number of teenagers who get disconnected from the Church.

The nomad group is comprised of young people who have left their Churches but they still believe in God and the Christian principles. This group of teenagers identify themselves as Christians, yet they do not have any participation in the Church. This is the biggest group of the teenagers that fall out of the Church and it comprises 40% of the total teenagers that leave the Church [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth#.UoP7pChER8s]. The exiles are the most complicated teenagers of all the groups. These are the teenagers who are connected to the world around them while at the same time they are following Jesus. Given that they do not want to be condemned for their engagement in worldly pleasures while attending Church, they opt to leave the Church. Teenagers and young adults who want to have a middle ground comprise 20% of the Church drop out. This research indicates that even though the majority of the young people are leaving the Church, most of them continue to hold on to their faith.

This research thus indicates that there is a ray of light present in this dark situation able to strengthen the Church leaders in their bid to reach out to the young people falling out of the Church. However, while it is comforting to know that most of the teenagers say ‘no’ to Church but say ‘yes’ to Jesus, it raises a concern regarding whether or not young people are capable of growing in faith without attending the Church. Saint Paul reminds Christians in Hebrews 10.25 that they should “*not desert the gathering of ourselves together...*” which means that Christian should “*celebrate with those who said to them, Let us go to the company of the LORD*” (Psalm 122.1). It is unfortunate, however that these scriptural encouragements are kept at the periphery of 79% of the believers lives, who believe that spiritual growth and maturity does not require a connection to a community of believers. This means that even though most young people identify themselves as believers, yet they do not attend Church. In general, they devote very little time to spiritual growth and, as a result, they tend to be spiritually lukewarm. It thus seems to be essential to bring the teenagers back in the Church so that they can develop their faith through grace because “... *faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the gospel of God*” (Romans 10.17).

3. Reasons why teenagers are leaving the Church

A Barna Group study devoted to explore opportunities and challenges encountered by teens in their development of faith identified six main reasons that account for 51% of teenagers’ disconnection from the Church [7].

- *Overprotectiveness of the Church:* One of the main reasons that contemporary young people leave the Church is their new situation of unprecedented access to competing worldviews and ideas and the prodigious popular culture of consumption. This affects their faith in Jesus, especially when they try to connect it with the surrounding world [8]. 23%

of the young people interviewed in the research believed that Christians demonize everything that is outside the Church. 22% of the young people believed that the Church ignores the real world problems while 85% believed that the Church is too concerned with the harmful nature of video games, movies, and music. This seeming overprotectiveness of the Church is what breeds resistance among young people who wish to be set free to have ‘experience’ of the world [9].

- *Teenagers’ Shallow Experience of Christianity:* 20% of young people who disconnect from their Church consider God absent from their Church experience, 25% say biblical teaching is unclear, and faith is irrelevant to their interests and career and 31% consider Church attendance boring. Such a shallow exposure of teenagers to Christianity predisposes them to be corrupted by the popular culture, which ultimately leads to their disconnection [10].
- *Perception of the Church as Antagonistic to Science:* The teenagers’ feeling of tension between Science and Christianity makes them feel disconnected from their Church. 35% of the young people believe that Christians are too confident in thinking that they know answers to all questions while 30% consider Christianity out of step with the science that defines the world that we live in. 25% consider the Church as anti-scientific, while 23% are confused by the debate on evolution versus creation. Most science-minded young people struggle between sticking to their faith while at the same time furthering their scientific related industries [N. Banerjee, *The New York Times*, March 28, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/28/politics/life-death-and-soulsearching-at-easter-services.html>].
- *Casual Consideration of Sexuality Matters:* 20% of the teenagers feel disconnected to their Church because they consider the ‘say no to sex’ sexual philosophy of the Church insufficient in the contemporary techno-porno world. Most teenagers perceive Church judgmental and simplistic amid living in the world that highly values hyper-sexuality over wholeness [11]. Teenagers are torn between embracing Church teaching on chastity and sexual purity and remaining sexuality active, which is favoured by the popular culture. Teenagers consider Christianity’s teaching on sexuality too conservative and out of date. Most of the Church-going teenagers are sexually active, and they tend to feel disconnected from the Church when the Church teaches against engaging in fornication [12].
- *Wrestling with Christianity’s Exclusive Nature/Claims:* 31% of the young people perceive the Church’s teaching too exclusive to the contemporary, multi-cultural and pluralistic age [13]. Modern culture, on the other hand, esteems tolerance, open-mindedness, and acceptance. Young people are very eclectic in terms of sexuality, race, religion, ethnicity, and sources of authority. Given such cultural background, most of them want to find a common ground, which is not offered by the Church. 29% of the young people consider Christianity inflexible and unwilling to change in

congruence with the changes of this age, which leaves them in a dilemma of choosing either their friends or faith [14].

- *Unfriendliness of the Church towards Doubters:* The common experience of the young people in the Church seems to be that the Church does not allow them to express doubts. They are not allowed to admit areas in which they consider Christianity not to make sense and when they do, the response of the Church to their doubt is often incompetent. 36% of the young persons hold the view that the Church does not allow them to ask pressing questions about life in the Church. 23% of them thus continue to harbour intellectual doubts concerning their faith [1]. Young people are in the age of ‘getting to know the world’ so they want an environment where they can ask questions and express their feelings freely without fearing anything. The world is always willing and ready to listen to them and, given that the Church does not allow the room for questioning, they feel more appreciated and assisted by the world. This creates a disconnection with the Church [15].

The above are the major reasons cited for young people’s rebellion and disconnectedness from the Church. However, the issue of an acute threat in the form of an “*adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour*” (1 Peter 5.8) cannot be ruled out. The devil sows the seed of cynicism and doubt among the immature believers. He erects proud hearts, haughty minds, and self-reliance, where people think there is no need for God. In addition to the tricks and guiles of the devil in the world full of evil pleasures, deceptive and hollow philosophies have permeated all aspects of the society [16]. These world pressures move more inexorably forward, and relentlessly force Christians to ignore the word of God, and ultimately to forsake their faith and rationalize sin. Paul in Colossians 2.8 warned Christians about these worldly philosophies and cultures when he said, “*Beware lest any man spoils you through beliefs and vain treachery, after the custom of men, after the barebones of the world, and not according to Christ*” [4].

4. Preventing teenagers from leaving the Church

The Christian ecumenical Church has porous surfaces that create room for teenagers to leave the Church [<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/28/politics/life-death-and-soulsearching-at-easter-services.html>]. The above-identified reasons can be condensed into (1) the failure by parents to meet teenagers’ spiritual needs at home and (2) the Church’s unintentional isolation of teenagers [17]. This means that the solution to the problem of teenagers’ leaving the Church is hidden in solving these two factors. The role of the Church in raising teenagers to remain in the faith should be redefined while at the same time energy needs to be devoted to strengthening Christian homes [18]. As such, changing this tide calls for a change in the teenage ministry paradigm from a model that is based on Church and supported by homes to one that is based at home and supported by the Church. The problem of teenagers’ leaving the Church is urgent especially because many Churches work well with adults whose life questions

and life journey is conventional. There are three places where teenagers and children learn and develop their worldview and beliefs: (1) home, (2) school and (3) Church. A new stratagem for keeping youngsters in the Church and in the faith will be arrived at by integrating these systems [19].

4.1. Parents' role

Parents play an instrumental role in shaping the faith of their children. The Bible attributes to parents the prime role of teaching their children *“from youth up to recognize the benefits of God, and hence to love Him ... he will not forget it afterwards when he is old”* (Proverbs 22.6). The 16th century reformers of the Church recognised the instrumental role of parents teaching their children the word of God. They realised that Christian parents' training of their children was a pillar to the strength of the Church. Martin Luther King noted that *“parents ought to bring up children in the fear of God”*. These reformers expected parents to provide for their children a formal catechetical instruction, as well as a daily example of their own Christian journey. During this reform period, the envisioned family setting constituted a place where the truth of God was both caught and taught. This contributed to strong faith, believers, homes, and strong Churches. As such, this historical practice of making homes strong as a way of strengthening Church should be reinstated in order to prevent teenagers from leaving the Church [14, p. 32-34].

This new strategy and change of focus will be pivotal in changing the Church. This change in the focus of the Church's role does not rule out other roles of the Church. In the new strategy, the Church will focus on empowering and equipping parents to execute their spiritual mandate. Church leaders are supposed to support parents in order to raise a Christian family, which will contribute to raising Church teenagers with rich and solid Christian foundations [20]. Children get their values from their homes, and when homes are made into true disseminators of the truth, it becomes easier to raise children who will not be corrupted by the worldly views. In this new strategy, pastors and Church leaders are supposed to continue executing priestly duties like preaching, evangelizing and visiting the sick, while the youth ministry focus will be on the homes. These strategies require the pastors to turn much of their effort to making Christian homes and parents stronger instead of concentrating on establishing events and programs for the teenagers foundation [21].

In order to solve the problem of teenagers' leaving their faith and Church, pastors and Church leaders are in a good position to teach the Church about what constitutes a Christ-centred family. They should teach by modelling a Christ-centred family through interaction with their children and spouses and through other occasions of catechetical instructions in the Church. Parents should also be provided with resources such as Bible study guides and devotional books, which they use in their families and teach about devotional prayers [22]. Other ways of equipping parents to cultivate a Christ-centred home include providing informal training and actively encouraging them to play their spiritual role in their

interaction with children. The Church needs to focus more on building up strong families with strong Christian values which will influence the way in which the teenagers view the world [23].

4.2. Church's role

In the new strategy, the role of the Church is to empower and equip parents to do more and better teaching. In order for the Church to effectively fulfil this responsibility, it needs to delegate its duties of teaching the faith to the parents [24]. However, this does not mean that the Church should abrogate its role. It should rather collaborate with parents in bringing up their children in Godly ways and develop faith in teenagers. The central focus of the Church is to supplement the modelling and teaching done by the parents in their homes. The Church should use practical resources, prayers, means of grace and teaching to empower and strengthen the parents to model, and teach young people Christian faith. Focusing on family-centred youth programs does not mean that teen-specific programs should end, rather it gives more emphasis on empowering families [25].

In addition to empowering families, pastors and youth leaders should familiarise themselves with the spiritual needs of the teenagers. They should look for a different way of preaching about grace and sin. Church leaders should engage with the youths in order to make them feel accepted and not condemned. Furthermore, the Church should establish other subsets of the strategies that include having adult-teenagers mentorship and relationship, involving teenagers in Church activities like worship and Bible study, and using Christian schools to perpetuate Christian values [L. Goodstein, New York Times, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/16/us/nationalspecial2/16pope.html>].

Connecting teenagers with God, loving and mature Christians will provide an avenue where teenagers will be provided with Christian role models, shared life experience, and mentorship [26]. In addition to this, building the relationship between teenagers and their parents will help in building up a home Church, where Christian values can be shared. Involving teenagers in Church activities gives them a sense of belonging to a group which they can identify with. In a small group setting, they are able to share their experiences, talk about their challenges and have someone to encourage them. Other activities, such as the Bible study, deepens their understanding of the word of God, helps them to be prayerful (especially when they are given a prayer partner), and offers the social support which is instrumental for spiritual development. Rooting children deep in the word of God and encouraging them to have individual meditations and devotional time will elate their spiritual maturity and help them stand strong amid the pressures of the world [27].

Nurturing teenagers to grow up into mature and loving adults requires the cooperation of parents and the Church. The parent plays an instrumental role in dictating the direction in life that their child will take. This means that placing a parent at the epicentre of the child's spiritual development will be productive

and will help to create not only harmony at homes but also will be passed from one generation to another. When people grow up, they raise their children using the experience that they have had with their parents. As such, the continuity of the Church relies on the ability of the parents to encourage, teach, model and show their children, that Christian faith is real and essential for one's life [26, p. 17].

5. Conclusions

Working with teenagers and helping them stay in their Church and deepen their faith is not a simple task. Given the present-day spiritual turbulences (caused by numerous sects and religious groups), sexual frenzy, and various forms of peer pressure, to name but a few challenges of the popular culture perpetuated through media, stirring spiritual growth of youths in this century seems to be more challenging than it was one or two centuries ago. (We concur with Lesková and Valčo in their assessment of the need place the highest “priority on intentional designing of the subject of ‘Media Education’ as part of educational processes on all age levels, primarily then among the adolescents” [28, p. 329].) Nevertheless, the Church must never give up on its mission to help teenagers follow Christ. It can do so by using the strategy that will place focus on Christ-centred families. This may prove to be a big step in moulding children in the right way and ensuring by the time they attain a teen age that they are well rooted in the word of God [29]. In order to cultivate Christ-centred families, however, Christ-centred and Spirit-filled communities are necessary in order to connect the “shattered pieces within the lives of individuals and put together (socially) the seemingly random mosaic of contradictory and competing desires and fears of human subjects into a community with a shared vision, ethos, and purpose” [30, p. 101]. Because only such “[c]onsequential faith as an inner, existential disposition of the human subject, arising as a result of one's participation in the embodied narrative of the Gospel, has the potential to be this kind of bond of cohesion and life motivation” [30, p. 101]. Teenagers as individual persons are never “placed in a spiritual vacuum and left dependent on esoteric-mystical inspirations. The individual lives in concrete, historical relationships and his decision making takes place in the given framework of his office as a specific place of responsibility in the world.” [31, p. 53] This is why the Churches need to continue organising teenagers' development programs that will nurture their spiritual growth and expose them to the reality of life. While doing this, they must remember that “[C]hurch doctrine and real-life practice of one's Christian identity converge on the mission field, that is, in our daily life of witness as we fulfil our human callings in the new freedom of Evangelical faith” [32, p. 182]. As such, it is essential for both, the Church officials and its members to work together in ensuring that the spiritual health of youths is taken care of and that they stick to their faith and Church.

References

- [1] J.O. Balswick and J.K. Balswick, *The family: A Christian perspective on the contemporary home*, Baker Academic, Ada (MI), 2007, 23.
- [2] R. Rosen, *The world split open: How the modern women's movement changed America*, Tantor eBooks, Old Saybrook, 2013, 14.
- [3] M. Csikszentmihalyi and B. Schneider, *Becoming adult: How teenagers prepare for the world of work*, Basic Books, New York, 2010, 90-91.
- [4] K.C. Dean, *Almost Christian: What the faith of our teenagers is telling the American Church*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, 62.
- [5] C. Schlect, *Critique of modern Youth Ministry*, Canon Press & Book Service, Moscow, 2007, 40.
- [6] G. Barna, *Generation next: What you need to know about today's youth*, Baker Publishing Group, Ada (MI), 2008, 122.
- [7] R.L. Dudley, *Why our teenagers leave the Church: Personal stories from a 10-year study*, Review and Herald Public Association, Nampa, 2000, 46.
- [8] C. Osiek and D.L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament world: Households and house Churches*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2007, 16.
- [9] M. Senter, *The coming revolution in youth ministry*, Victor, Wheaton, 2012, 82.
- [10] L.J. Francis, *Teenagers and the Church*, Collins, London, 2004, 22.
- [11] R.R. Osmer, *A teachable spirit: Recovering the teaching office in the Church*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, 47.
- [12] C.E. Lytch, *Choosing Church: What makes a difference for teens*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2004, 104.
- [13] D. Kimball, *The emerging Church*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2009, 8.
- [14] N.T. Ammerman, *Bible believers: Fundamentalists in the modern world*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2010, 66-69.
- [15] D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Routledge, London, 2013, 82.
- [16] J.E. Reid Jr, *Pop. Music Soc.*, **17(2)** (2013) 33-45.
- [17] T. Bąk, H. Jurjewicz and J. Mierzwa, *Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice*, Diocesan House of Formation, New Jersey, 2015, 29-49.
- [18] C. Smith and W.R. Kenan, *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*, Oxford University Press, USA, 2005, 57.
- [19] G. Barna, *Real teens: A contemporary snapshot of youth culture*, Gospel Light Publications, Delight (AR), 2011, 16.
- [20] P. Schwadel and C. Smith, *Portraits of Protestant teens: A report on teenagers in major US denominations*, The National Study of Youth and Religion, Chapel Hill (NC), 2005, 15.
- [21] J. Mierzwa, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(4)** (2016) 189-202.
- [22] M. Kardis, *Principle of justice: its cultural-religious and social background premises*, P-T Muhely, Budapest, 2013, 41-61.
- [23] H. Jurjewicz, *Spółeczeństwo Kultura Wartości*, *Studium Społeczne*, **5** (2013) 193-204.
- [24] T. Schultz and J. Schultz, *Why nobody learns much of anything at Church: And how to fix it*, Group, Group Publishing, Salem, 2013, 66.
- [25] M. Cornwall, *The religion and family connection: Social science perspectives*, **16(2)** (2008) 207-231.
- [26] B.F. Freudenburg and R. Lawrence, *The family-friendly Church*, Group Publishing, Salem, 2008, 87.

- [27] J. Kesler and R. A. Beers, *Parents & teenagers*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 2014, 114.
- [28] A. Lesková and M. Valčo, *XLinguae*, **10(3)** (2017) 324-332.
- [29] K. Kardis and M. Kardis, *Identita kresťana a axiómy bezpečnosti v sekulárnej desocializovanej Európe*, in *Božie milosrdenstvo v obraze katechézy*, GTF PU v Presove, Prešov, 2016, 104-116.
- [30] K. Valčová, M. Pavlíková and M. Roubalová, *Komunikácie*, **18(3)** (2016) 98-104.
- [31] M. Valčo, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **13(1)** (2017) 47-58.
- [32] M. Valčo, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **12(4)** (2016) 181-188.