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BRIDGING THE DISCONNECT:
REFRAMING VOCATION FOR THE SAKE OF
YOUNG ADULTS, THE CHURCH, & ITS LEADERS

BY

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“So, how do you get young adults to come to church?” Over the past four years of seminary, I’ve had countless discussions about this question with classmates, professors, pastors, and others in the church. The question is posed different ways, based on varying assumptions about young adults, but they all fundamentally come back to this question. Approaches to ministry vary just as much, but with a singular goal in mind: to foster and nurture a relationship with God that is beneficial for life. In order to do that, we need to get young adults “to come to church.”

That goal isn’t necessarily misguided in itself. For both leaders and members of the church, there is the belief that being present and active in a Christian community is important and vital for fostering a deep faith that, in turn, is beneficial for all aspects of life. Participating in congregational life - worship, service, stewardship, prayer, and education - deepens one’s understanding of God, nurtures one’s relationship with God, and thus positively affects all aspects of one’s life.

Yet, in the face of the well-known reality of an aging and declining membership in denominations and congregations, getting young adults to come to church is more vital than ever.¹ While congregations are responding, research is showing that young adults are not flocking to the doors; in fact, research is showing that their presence in the institutional church is declining.² It has left those invested in the life of the church scratching their heads, asking, “what is going on, and why aren’t they coming?”

However, I wonder if people invested in the church are approaching ministry to young adults out of a concern for relevancy and sustainability of the institutional church, rather than out of a theological sense of how God may be calling the church to enter into the lives of young adults and minister to them in this present day and age. To approach

the question of ministry to and with young adults theologically calls those in the church not only deeply understand young adults' lives, but to also be critical of the church's models of congregational life and its existing models of leadership. In doing so, a reality is uncovered: *a disconnect exists between the lives of young adults and the life of the church and its leaders, and it must be bridged for the sake of witnessing and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to young adults.*

Defining Young Adults

So what does the "typical" life of a young adult look like? That question might be just as difficult to answer as the question of bringing them into the church! Defining young adulthood by certain trends and characteristics, rather than by a concrete age range, gives a more accurate picture. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow and psychologist Jeffrey Arnett have both spent time researching the period of young adulthood and its most relevant issues and aspects. What both discovered is that young adults' lives are affected by and are lived out in a variety of different "spheres" within the world. This includes social and cultural realities such as globalization, the economy and higher education.³ However, there are three events that both Wuthnow and Arnett agree directly affect the lives of young adults: marriage, starting a family, and work.⁴ These three spheres are significant because historically, they are considered "milestones" that signify entry into adulthood.⁵ What Arnett and Wuthnow observed is that these milestones are being reached significantly later in life by today's young adults; they are getting married later, having children later and fewer of them, and their work history is marked by frequent job changes with no discernible path toward a long-term career.⁶

These realities open up seemingly endless possibilities for young adults, but questions and decisions arise out of negotiating so many aspects of life. "How do I become independent from my parents, and how will that change my relationship with them?" "Will a romantic relationship, marriage, or a child hinder my career opportunities?" Decisions on higher education - college or vocational - affect opportunities for work and increased financial independence. At the same time, the rising cost of higher education may block young adults from any higher education, and thus, limit work choices and opportunities. Speaking of work, young adults also ask, "What type of work interests me?" "What line of work do I really want to commit my life to?"

Clearly, one can see that young adults' lives are complex, and they are simultaneously negotiating all these aspects of life that will set the course of their life as they eventually enter adulthood. Also, young adults' beliefs and values will be shaped out of this same complexity and negotiation of life. This includes religious faith.

Defining "The Church"

What does congregational life, or "church" look like? Another way to ask this could be, "what typically comes to mind when one is asked about what goes on in the typical church?" Generally, congregational life is expressed in these terms: worship, education, small group ministries, children, and youth and family ministries. One can see a general theme emerging - the congregation is the communal center of life that meets people's many needs, including social, relational, and religious. Even outreach ministries such as mission and evangelism adopt this theme, with the additional aim of extending to those who are not a part of it, an invitation to join and be active in the congregation.

This portrayal of life suggests a belief that all life is based in and out of one single “sphere” – religious life. One's life consists of negotiating how all other aspects of life align or don't align with religious life, beliefs, and values. Similarly, questions arise, but they reflect the commitment to religious life. "How does being a committed follower of Christ affect my role as friend or co-worker?" "How does my faith direct my decision-making in my work, romantic relationships, and social behaviors?"

This reduces life to a singular purpose: assimilation. In religious terms, this is understood and expressed as discipleship - committing one's life to God or Christ. Congregational life is valuable in its ability to teach and provide a place to practice religious life. In turn, they can assimilate this way of life to their "other" life outside the congregation's. For those who wish to live out this commitment more deeply, it becomes the only way of life. These are people who work "full-time" in the church: pastors and ministry staff. These people commit themselves to work that preserves and tends to congregational life that attracts people and encourages their active participation in it, with the goal of making them "disciples" who can assimilate their lives to religious faith and life.

Young Adults & The Church – A Disconnect

These definitions of young adult life and congregational life make it clear that a disconnect exists between them. Young adults' lives, beliefs, and values are shaped by experiences in many different spheres of life, no one having priority over the other exclusively, but one or more may be elevated to greater importance in the process of negotiating them. The church, however, operates under the assumption that one sphere, religious life expressed through the model of congregational life, is exclusively of greater

importance than all other spheres of life. Additionally, these models of leadership in the church reinforce this commitment to a life of discipleship.

This disconnect seems to be keeping young adults away from the church. Yet, why exactly is this happening? Why aren't young adults finding a life of faith in God through the good news of Jesus Christ beneficial for their lives – lives that can be chaotic and filled with challenges as they negotiate multiple spheres simultaneously within them?

The “Disconnect” – Digging Deeper

Young Adults

Recall that both Wuthnow and Arnett observed a general trend in their observations concerning young adults and marriage, children, and long-term career. Compared to previous generations of young adults, today's young adults are generally fulfilling these “milestones” of adulthood later in their lives, and thus delaying entry into adulthood. Since 1960, there has been a decline in the proportion of married to unmarried people and an increase in the typical age at which people are getting married.⁷ With respect to children, the average age of women giving birth to their first child has increased since 1959, and the average number of children per household has decreased.⁸ Regarding trends in work and career, Wuthnow writes,

“In the 1950s.... it was possible to imagine the organization man starting after high school at an assembly plant or after college as a chemist and continuing in that line of work until retirement. Not everyone did...but the point of Whyte's analysis was to show that working up the hierarchy by pursuing a single career in a single place of employment or industry had become the norm...That is clearly no longer the case. When asked in one national survey who many different lines of work they had been in as an adult, nearly half of respondents age 21 through 29 said 3 or more.”⁹

So, why is this happening? Based on his observations of young adults, Arnett presents five main features that distinguish emerging adulthood.¹⁰ They are,

- It is the age of *identity exploration*.
- It is the age of *instability*.
- It is the most *self-focused* age of life.
- It is the age of feeling *in-between*, in transition.
- It is the age of *possibilities*, of unparalleled opportunity in life.¹¹

Additionally, Arnett's research yielded new criteria for what "adulthood" means to young adults.

"In a variety of regions of the United States, in a variety of ethnic groups, in studies using both questionnaires and interviews, people consistently state the following as the top three criteria for adulthood: accept responsibility for yourself. Make independent decisions. Become financially independent."¹²

What Arnett's conclusions suggest is that while marriage, having children, and establishment in a long-term career are still desires of young adults, they are no longer the primary focus in the move toward adulthood, and thus, there is no rush in reaching them.¹³ In their place, new priorities and a new view of life have emerged, created in part by new realities that have opened up choices to today's young adults that were simply not available to young adults of previous generations. Wuthnow identifies two of these realities: higher education and globalization.

Higher education "broadens their horizons, gives them a better sense of history, and communicates important vocational skills."¹⁴ Wuthnow notes more young adults are taking advantage of opportunities to seek college degrees.¹⁵ Furthermore, in an increasingly technical and information-focused world,¹⁶ some higher education is becoming necessary in order to pursue and perform certain types of work.

Another reality is young adults' exposure to the forces of globalization; the reality that the capability exists to travel to all parts of the world.¹⁷ Globalization has created an environment where opportunities are open now more than ever, as long as one is willing and able to be mobile enough to take advantage of them. Wuthnow and Arnett further

assert, given concerns over financial independence, the need to be mobile, especially in work, affects all other spheres of life and the decisions that come with each of them.¹⁸

These realities, coupled with the shifts in how young adults view life and adulthood, reveal two insights about how young adults fashion their lives. One, young adults are committed to particular life goals, but will reach them on their own terms. Independence in decision-making and focus on the development of the self are central to this. A person's identity and worth is not tied up in how quickly they can get married, have children, and establish a career; rather it is in the process of discovering what one is committed and interested in, and achieving varying degrees of autonomy and independence in life.

Two, young adults place a high degree of value on exploration and choice that is unbounded, thus allowing for the process of discovery described above. As Arnett's findings highlight, while young adults are committed to discovering their place in the world, they are unsure of what that place will be or what it will look like – they are in transition. Therefore, any commitment or decision that may close off an opportunity or future experience is ultimately put off until one is sure that is who they are and are sure it is worthy of their commitment. For example, marriage and having children are delayed because it closes off opportunity and exploration in other spheres, such as work or romantic relationships. All this is not to say that young adults don't honor commitment in any form or never adopt distinct beliefs or values. Young adults think deeply about such things, but look to many different spheres of experience and life to form them because of their preference for independence and unbounded personal choice and exploration.

In Contrast: The Church

“American religion has always been a participatory faith. It was not enough simply to believe. Or even to belong, at least of belonging meant nothing more than having one’s name on a membership roster. People of faith are expected to take part in their congregations.”¹⁹

Here, Wuthnow highlights well the high value the church has placed on congregational life, and the belief that active participation within it is what creates and nurtures faith. It is out of this basic assumption that the church has focused its efforts on creating models of congregational life that attract people into it, and encourage active participation within the congregation.

That said, *who attends the church?* Wuthnow also did research to profile "regular church goers," or those who are present in congregations. Wuthnow's research yielded that the majority of regular church attendees are married (60 percent) and a larger portion also have children (73 percent).²⁰ In light of this, Wuthnow makes an important conclusion.

"Were congregations to gear its programs to the interests of the majority, it would logically have programs for married people and for young adults with children, rather than unmarried adults."²¹

What these two statements show is that in previous generations, the church formed a model of communal life and ministry based on the fact that young adults marry, have children, and start long-term careers quickly after they leave the homes and families of their youth. Through creating a communal center that both met the social, relational, and developmental needs of young families, these young adults were attracted to congregations, and became active in the life and ministry of them. Through attraction and participation, the church believed they were nurturing a vibrant faith that people then would "take out into the world" and into other aspects of their lives. The practice of

"Christian life" inside congregational life would foster the ability to live that same life outside of it as well.

This also affected leadership within the church. While these young people were out working full-time jobs and raising families during the week, leaders were needed to create and execute ministries that would sustain this model of congregational life. Both pastors and lay leaders were considered "full-time" employees of the congregation whose roles and responsibilities were orientated to all activities originating from the religious sphere, congregational life.

Implications of the Disconnect

Robert Wuthnow writes,

“When researchers study American religion, they often begin with polls about belief in God or attendance at religious services. They may then move to a consideration of which kind of congregations people attend and whether these congregations are growing or declining. Approaching religion this way is overly narrow. It reinforces the mistaken view that religion is self-contained – an autonomous religious market or religious economy in which religion is all that matters. I have never interviewed anybody for whom that was true. Their religious beliefs and practices are but one of the many activities and interest that make up their lives.”²²

In light of certain social and cultural realities, so have the priority and negotiation of certain aspects of life with young adults. The problem is that the basic assumption that young adults get married, have children, and start long-term careers shortly after leaving the homes of their youth no longer applies to young adults today. Therefore, models of congregational life and leadership built on this assumption are no longer effective, or are at least significantly less effective in witnessing and proclaiming the Christian faith to a growing population of young adults who are not married, do not have children, and are not along the path of a long-term career.

This has other implications on the emphasis and value the church has placed on the influence of the religious sphere, or on discipleship. Since all aspects of life are equally potentially beneficial, young adults do not rule the religion out as insignificant or irrelevant.²³ However, when the religious life could potentially restrict a young adult's unbounded choice and exploration and dictates they adopt particular behaviors and beliefs, then young adults are faced with the choice to accept or reject it. When young adults experience the church in this way, whether perceived or real, they are more than likely choose to reject the church.²⁴ Ultimately, what one does is borne out the basis that they *believe* it to be beneficial and *value* its presence in their lives. Today, what young adults value and believe is wide open; they perceive religious institutions and life to be generally hypocritical and restrictive.²⁵

Wuthnow and Arnett's work also reveal an interesting emphasis that plays a major role in young adults' lives: the role of work. Recalling Arnett's discovery of new criteria for adulthood, work becomes the means in which responsibility for one's actions, independence in decision-making, and financial independence can be reached. Additionally, and this is my own observation, work seems to also be the space in which young adults work out their commitments, beliefs, and values. More than ever, young adults are searching for work that pays well and leads to independence, but they also seem to be searching for *meaningful* work – work where they can make a difference and contribute to the benefit of both others and the world.²⁶ Theological discussion begins from this insight about work and young adults. Within in the Christian, and more specifically the Lutheran tradition, there is a theological arena to reflect on this: *the doctrine of vocation*.

Reconnecting the Disconnect: Re-framing Vocation

Martin Luther & the Doctrine of Vocation

Any theological dialogue about vocation must begin with the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, and his doctrine of vocation. Luther's doctrine of vocation historically has been understood as an articulation of connecting the spiritual/religious life to life in the world. It was a doctrine formed out of a response to the disconnect Luther experienced in his day: the status of laity and the status of monastics and clergy in religious life.²⁷ Luther's argument originated from his critique of monastic life. Michael Bennethum summarizes this reality.

“By the 12th century, this...elevation of church office holders as possessing a higher calling, a nobler form of work, and closer relationship with God was complete. Gratiani, a canon lawyer, wrote...’There are two kinds of Christians: the kind that possess a divine office and are given to contemplation and prayer...These are the clergy who are devoted to God...And the other kind of Christians who are the laity.’”²⁸

The implication was that because the work of monastics and clergy were held in higher esteem, laypersons needed to do more in order to earn salvation, and increase their standing with God. The popular, well-known, result of this line of thinking was the selling of indulgences to the laity during Luther's time. Indulgences were “divine insurance policies” which people could purchase to ensure salvation for themselves or loved ones, because their work alone did not earn them the merits of salvation.

Luther strongly refuted this, and wrote his popular 95 Thesis in response, which marked the historical beginning point of the Protestant Reformation. The doctrine of vocation became relevant because it helped refute this notion of “works righteousness” that Luther opposed. In his doctrine of vocation, Luther asserted that all men have both a spiritual calling and worldly calling to fulfill in this life. A layperson's work was actually

the place in which both could be worked out. For example, a farmer's work in planting and harvesting crops was godly work because it tended to God's earth and benefitted one's neighbors. Vocation was simply fulfilling God's commandment to "love God, and love one's neighbors." Through loving and caring for others in one's vocation, one was also loving and serving God.²⁹ Love and service of God was not simply limited to "religious" acts.³⁰

In summary, Luther's doctrine of vocation asserts that all people have a vocation, every type of work can be a vocation, and vocation links the Christian's daily work with the center of Christian faith.³¹ However, systematic theologian Miroslav Volf, recognizing the significant differences in culture, economy, and life between Luther's Reformation period and his modern industrial age, offered a critique of Luther's doctrine of vocation. Volf's observations make him a valuable conversation partner in understanding how vocation is recognized today as "calling."

Vocation as "Calling": Problems

As stated, the popular understanding of vocation today is "calling." Michael Bennethum explains,

"Time and time again I have observed that when adults in the church discover that God has *called them* to let their faith as Christians permeate every aspect of their lives, they internalize this insight as a powerful affirmation of who they are and what they do, both within and apart from their involvement in the life of the congregation....The Christian faith affirms the importance and recognizes... normal daily labors of believers as activities that can express their commitment to Christ as well as serve their God."³²

Problems arise in this understanding of vocation. First, vocation is inherently an *insider language*. Vocation is for the Christian, and the arena in which the Christian lives out their faith commitments in their work. Second it is an affirmation of self, but it is an affirmation of self that is understood solely within a Christian identity. Systematic

theologian Miroslav Volf identifies such an understanding of vocation as “ethical and moral sanctification.” Volf writes,

“Taking the doctrine of sanctification as their starting point, the early church fathers reflected on work from two main perspectives. First and foremost, they discussed *what influence the new life in Christ should have on a Christian’s daily work*....The second approach to work we find...is reflection on the *influence of work on Christian character*.”³³

Volf’s assessment shows that the notion of vocation as calling is one that is steeped in an emphasis and narrow concern for the life of the believing Christian. Vocation as answering one’s call from God then becomes chiefly about *discipleship as assimilation* – being able to fit one’s faith into daily work and really, all aspects of life. It is aligning all spheres of life to the sphere of faith.

Volf contends that this is problematic, both contextually and theologically.

“Luther’s notion of work has serious limitations, both in terms of its applicability to modern work, and in its theological persuasiveness.”³⁴ In response, he offers a critique of Luther’s notion of vocation.

“There is a dangerous ambiguity in Luther’s notion of vocation. In his view, spiritual calling comes through the proclamation of the gospel, while external calling comes through one’s station. It has proven difficult for Lutheran theology to reconcile the two callings in the life of an individual Christian when a conflict arises.”³⁵

This creates a decision for the person: either find work where religious life is performed explicitly, or be left to negotiate merging religious life, beliefs, and values into forms of secular work. When one considers the value of independence and unbounded exploration and choice that guides young adults’ lives today, either decision proves challenging.

First, bending one’s whole life to a singular sphere of religious life would likely be rejected, because it would cut off certain opportunities and exploration for the future. Similarly, not all forms of work likely hold the same meaning; working at a fast food

restaurant does not hold the same meaning as working as a health care provider, for example. It would be highly unlikely that a person would see the former as an expression of meaningful work in line with their religious beliefs and values, if they ever did hold religious life as the priority in their lives.

Second, Volf recognizes that the modern industrial age has affected patterns towards work. Like the world young adults live in today, Volf asserts the emphasis on mobility and information in today's society.

“The notion of vocation is not applicable to the increasingly mobile industrial and information society. Most people in these societies do not keep a single job or employment for a lifetime, but often switch from one job to another in the course of their active life....And even if they could keep their jobs, they often feel that being tied down to a job is a denial of their freedom and opportunity for development...Luther's understanding of external vocation corresponds necessarily to the singleness and permanence of their spiritual calling. As there is one irrevocable spiritual calling, so there must be one irrevocable external calling.”³⁶

The implication is that the goal of life is to live into one singular calling that is in line with one's religious life, beliefs, and values. Vocation's aim then, is to find this one calling, and assuming the sphere of religious faith has priority, to live into it as quickly as possible. This aim may be too limiting considering the priority young adults place on their independence and unbounded exploration and choice. Also, what pressures does this place on young adults given the realities of globalization and higher education? If they must be highly mobile and thus take on different jobs, does that mean they fall in and out of their God-given calling? If they do not have the necessary higher education for what might be their calling, does that mean they're now unable to fulfill God's call?

While Volf contends his argument is with Luther's notion of vocation, I see this differently. Volf is critical of an understanding of vocation that demands one assimilates their external role in the world to their spiritual role as Christian. Following this, I

believe that Volf is really critical of the notion of vocation as “calling” that is defined by a notion of *discipleship as assimilation*. Luther’s understanding of vocation is not so reductive; it is primarily concerned with witness to the tension between law and gospel; stability and mobility; freedom and constraint.³⁷

“Between creation and resurrection lies life on earth and vocation. Vocation bears witness to the belief that the body is to be raised, since vocation lays the law and the cross on the body, while the body is on earth, where the cross of Christ stood... Though vocation the law bears witness to the resurrection; through the sacraments the gospel bears witness to the same.”³⁸

This recognizes a different way of viewing vocation - one that is more faithful to Luther’s notion of vocation. It is a notion of vocation that engages young adults in their lives and recognizes the tension that exists in negotiating and living in multiple aspects of their lives. It is also an understanding of vocation that witnesses to the reality that what and where they commit lives to – their work, relationships, beliefs, and values – are really tied deeply into the message and reality of God’s creative, redemptive, and life-giving action in and for the world. This recognizes a notion of *vocation as mission* – cooperation and witness to God’s eschatological work towards a new creation.

Reframing Vocation: A missional lens

Volf’s critique led him to develop a theology of work, which is a distinct departure from the notion of vocation as “calling,” or discipleship. Volf’s theology of work is the concept of the new creation, or what he articulated as following Moltmann’s assertion that the Christian faith is eschatological at its very heart.³⁹ From this basis, Volf makes the following assertion.

“Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new creation or it is not Christian life at all. And the Spirit of God should determine the whole life, spiritual as well as secular, of a Christian.”⁴⁰

This highlights two insights. One, there is no distinction between a spiritual life and a secular one; all life is part of God's creation. Two, God, through the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, continually works in and through all aspects of creation – especially human beings - in order to bring about this new creation. The action that springs forth from human commitments to life, beliefs, and values, no matter how modest or broken, is synonymous with God's desire for a new creation for humanity. What is life-giving for humans is also life giving in God's eyes, and vice versa.⁴¹ Thus, human work has significance in that it participates and witnesses to God's eschatological reality. Human work understood this way is missional; it is cooperation with God in working towards the reality of God's eschatological future, the new creation, and it is witness to this reality – God's reality.

Volf emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in imparting *charisms*, or spiritual gifts, to human beings. These spiritual gifts are distinct in that “they relate to specific tasks and functions to which God calls and fits each Christian.”⁴² However, spiritual gifts are not to be seen as restrictive to either congregational life or an “elite group” within the Christian community.⁴³ Since the Holy Spirit is active and present in all forms of life, both inside and outside the life of the church, spiritual gifts given by this same spirit are imparted to all people, for use in all types of and roles in work, inside and outside Christian community.⁴⁴

So where does this leave us? Perhaps, rather than completely throw out the notion of vocation completely, vocation needs to be re-framed. Rather than understanding vocation through the lens of discipleship (calling), vocation needs to be seen through a missional lens (cooperation and witness). Vocation is human action that

cooperates and witnesses to God's eschatological future of a new creation. Vocational action is identified through discerning one's spiritual gifts, which are synonymous with one's passions, interests, and commitments that come from their exploration of and experiences in life.

Vocation reframed through a missional lens can repair the disconnect between the lives of young adults and the life of the church and its leaders. God's Spirit imparts gifts that people can use across multiple roles and forms of work. It recognizes and honors young adults' preference for unbounded exploration and choice in forming their identity as they move toward adulthood. Since God's active and present Spirit gives these gifts, people are brought into an experience with God through them. A variety of experiences and places can nurture faith, instead of only in active participation in congregational life. Therefore, vocation is about discernment, or identifying one's gifts, and engaging in experiences that cooperate and witness to God's eschatological work toward new creation. Additionally, there is no restriction on these engagements, as long as they do not run contrary to God's ongoing eschatological work.⁴⁵ Along these same lines, congregational life and the role of leaders in the church are beneficial in that they help distinguish Spirit-given gifts that promote new, abundant life for self and others from behaviors that run contrary to God's promotion of the same.⁴⁶ Finally, and perhaps most important, vocation reframed through a missional lens honors all spheres of life and young adults' participation in them. The commitments, values, and beliefs that come through life in all aspects of it are actually synonymous and congruent with the life and message of faith: God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. For example, a young adult's commitment to social justice actually reflects God's concern for justice as well; a

belief in unconditional love for all people is actually God's offer of unconditional love through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This understanding of vocation as mission has implications for the church as well. No longer should the church's goal be one of discipleship, attempting to assimilate young adults into the activity of congregational life and ministry in order that they might apply the beliefs and values of religious life into their life outside it. Rather, the church's aim should be helping young adults discern their own Spirit-given gifts, honoring their use in the multiple areas of their lives, and helping them recognize that their actions and utilization of such gifts are one and the same as God's eschatological action toward a new creation. The understanding of vocation through a missional lens holds the church and its leaders accountable for what their models of congregational life, ministry, and leadership communicate to the world and human beings, and particular to this discussion – young adults.

Bridging the Disconnect: "Making the First Move"

One of my professors in seminary stated in a lecture, "Congregations are at the heart of mission."⁴⁷ I would include in that also, leaders of congregations: pastors, diaconal ministers, and professional ministry staff. In this light, the church has two choices in engaging in ministry to young adults: continue its current model of congregational life and leadership, or change them. Wuthnow suggests the latter, compelling the church to consider the lives of young adults, and change the structure of congregational life and ministry accordingly.

"It is unfortunate...that religious congregations have not done a better job of figuring out what young adults want or need...young adults are increasingly a generation of bricoleurs who piece together their lives in highly diverse ways and from a multitude of sources."⁴⁸

The short answer is that congregations need to do something to engage young adults, and they need to make the first move. In order to imagine new models, congregations and leaders must start by adopting a theological basis for such change, and then construct new models of congregational life and leadership. To make this first step is to affirm all imagination of congregational life and leadership starts and flows from God.

The church faces two options then: either change the model of congregational life, or change models of leadership. I am more skeptical of change within congregations, and for rather practical reasons. First, because congregations have historically catered to people's needs through programming, adopting a missional model may prove difficult. Additionally, if the dominant value - whether held by a simple majority or by the key members of the congregation - is discipleship as assimilation, it will be difficult to enact change in the congregation. Finally, congregations are typically slow to change – and considering young adults and the fast-changing world they live in, can we stand to wait?

Therefore, we turn to changing models of leadership. I believe this to be more achievable, given the simple fact it is often easier to change and train an individual. More importantly however, I believe there are models of leadership that not only model and embody, but *at their core are vocation as mission*. Multi-vocational leadership, or more commonly known as bi-vocational or “tentmaker,” is the understanding that one both serves in the role as pastor and in another area of life. For example, one could be a teacher, artist, coach, or businessperson in addition to a pastor. The idea is that both roles, while distinct, are considered ministry, and they compliment and inform each other. There are other practical reasons for multi-vocational leaders as well: limited finances

and resources, empowering the laity of a congregation, an individual's varied interests, etc.

Theologically, multi-vocational leaders exercise ministry in a way that is missional. In serving multiple areas of life, both inside and outside the walls of the church, they cooperate with and witness to God's ongoing redemptive action toward the eschatological future – God's reality of the new creation.⁴⁹ Multi-vocational ministers are living out lives that utilize their Spirit-given gifts for ministry and life in the world, rather than attempting to fit into particular models of ministry that may or may not utilize those gifts. Furthermore, because of the Holy Spirit's presence in all forms of activity and life, multi-vocational leaders can adopt "secular" work with the understanding that all work is "spiritual" and therefore, ministry. Multi-vocational pastors and leaders model for all people what participation in God's mission in the world looks like, and in their work, witness to the presence of the Triune God in all forms of life, creating, redeeming, and sanctifying it. It is through their varied role and presence in the world that multi-vocational leaders engage young adults. It is through their living out in the world that multi-vocational leaders model and communicate the gospel to young adults. In turn, young adults are invited and empowered to participate in God's mission through the vocation of using their Spirit-given gifts in the world.

Multi-vocational pastors and leaders also live and work in a way that is much more authentic young adult's experience. They also live and work in multiple spheres and negotiate their lives within them. Their multi-vocational ministry communicates that all of life holds importance and meaning, for God's Spirit is present and breathing new life into it. Multi-vocational ministry also communicates to young adults that the good

news of Jesus Christ is normative, rather than assimilative, for life. Multi-vocational ministry also communicates that congregational life is beneficial as a place of communal discernment and recognition of this normative view, God's view, of life. In short, multi-vocational pastors and leaders, through their ministry, assist in “bridging the disconnect” between the lives of young adults and the life of the church.

That said, if the church is going to engage young adults moving forward, all pastors and leaders in young adult ministry must be multi-vocational, and this needs to be understood, welcomed, and supported fully as a viable model for leadership in ministry. Moreover, multi-vocational leaders in ministry may play a vital role the mission of the church and the whole of its mission and ministry moving forward. Robert Wuthnow writes,

“Younger adulthood is lengthening too, extending from the early twenties to the mid-forties as a result of people living longer and taking longer to accomplish many of the developmental tasks of early adult life.”⁵⁰

In light of Wuthnow’s conclusion, multi-vocational leaders and pastors may be needed not only for ministry to young adults, but to all ages of people who are growing up and living in today’s world. As the world changed in the past, so has the church reformed over time. The church today must do the same in its models of congregational life and leadership. For the sake of God’s mission in and to the world – the eschatological hope of a new creation - the Holy Spirit is revealing the gift of new ways of proclaiming and witnessing to the gospel, and this is indeed, good news! Come, Holy Spirit come!

¹ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One in five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” *Pew Research Center*, (October 9, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx> (accessed March 8, 2013).

Diana Butler Bass, “A Resurrected Christianity?” *Huffington Post*, April 7, 2012.

http://huffingtonpost.com/diana-butler-bass/a-resurrected-christianity_b_1410143.html?view=screen (accessed February 7, 2013).

² Cathy Lynn Grossman, “As Protestants Decline, those with no religion gain,” *USA Today*, October 9, 2012, Tuesday. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/10/08/nones-protestant-religion-pew/1618445/> (accessed February 7, 2013).

³ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 642-655, 727-745.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Arnett expresses similar assertions as Wuthnow in Chapter 6 & 7, about the role of higher education and work, respectively.

⁴ Wuthnow, Location 455-637. Arnett expresses similar observations in Chapters 4 & 5, about the role love and sex and marriage, respectively.

⁵ Wuthnow, location 290 & 298.

⁶ *Ibid.*, location 455, 489, & 563.

⁷ *Ibid.*, location 462.

⁸ *Ibid.*, location 489.

⁹ *Ibid.*, location 563.

¹⁰ Arnett, 18-19. Arnett’s argument stems from distinct differences in age ranges that define what he calls “emerging adulthood” from what is known as “young adulthood.” However, I previously noted in my definition of young adulthood that it is marked by certain characteristics and attitudes, versus age ranges. (Page 2) Moreover, most do not make the distinction between “emerging” and “young” adulthood. Therefore, I will use “young adulthood” throughout this discussion.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ Wuthnow, location 244. Wuthnow’s claims support Arnett’s.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, location 642.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, location 648

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, location 804.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, location 727.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, location 820.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, location 833.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, location 1047.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, location 440.

²³ Arnett, 165-172. Arnett highlights the mantra of many young adults: “spiritual but not religious.” This attitude was also discovered during the “Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life” poll.

²⁴ Arnett, 172-174. Attitude is also reflected in the Pew Forum poll and Grossman’s article in *USA Today*, which were previously mentioned.

²⁵ Arnett, 173.

²⁶ While I don’t have any other “hard” evidence to back this claim, in my own discussions with young adults (college settings, ministry, at seminary, myself) it is clear they are committed to bettering the world, while making a difference through their own efforts and contributions.

Arnett, 180-186. In his discussion about young adults' attitudes toward values, respondents conveyed a sense of "making a difference," and "helping others."

²⁷ D. Michael Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling! Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), Kindle Electronic Edition, 44-45.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Ibid., 48.

³¹ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 105-106.

³² Bennethum, 19-20.

³³ Volf, 71-72.

³⁴ Ibid., 107.

³⁵ Ibid., 107.

³⁶ Ibid., 108.

³⁷ Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957), xii. Wingren writes, "But there is one issue that will appear repeatedly... in a certain way, the main issue in Luther's thought on vocation is the relationship between mobility and stability, between freedom and constraint." Wingren concludes, and I believe rightly so, that Luther did not understand vocation so simplistically. The tension of living in faith for Luther, and for us today is never to be understood as easy.

³⁸ Ibid., 166.

³⁹ Volf, 79.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 92.

⁴² Ibid., 111.

⁴³ Ibid., 111-112.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 117-119. For Volf, "all people" means both Christian "believer" and "non-believer." Volf's theological understanding does not distinguish between "secular" and "spiritual" work as well.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁷ Dwight Zscheile, class lecture, [*What is Missional Church?*], IC 1615: Reading the Audiences, March 8, 2010, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

⁴⁸ Wuthnow, location 3066, 3298-99.

⁴⁹ Andrew Root, *Unlocking Mission & Eschatology in Youth Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle Electronic Edition, location 338-349.

⁵⁰ Wuthnow, location 132.

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