

Consolidated Baptist Church

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Consolidated Baptist Church, under the leadership of Pastor Richard Gaines, is a predominantly African-American congregation in Lexington, Kentucky. Founded in 1884 through the merger of two congregations, the church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. In 2003, the church relocated from an old church building near a large university campus to a new location in a suburban community. The new state-of-the-art church building has attracted many new members since the relocation. On a typical Sunday, the church has three morning worship services, with a combined attendance of over 1,500 people. Evangelism is a high priority at Consolidated. Scott, a young adult church member, summarized the evangelizing focus this way: “At the end of the day—that is what it is all about—connecting people to Christ.”¹ Through interviews with young adult members, in their own words, I identify seven key factors from my study of Consolidated Baptist Church to demonstrate how the church is effectively engaging young adults.

1. Attracting young adults through word of mouth

Consolidated does a terrific job of effectively engaging and attracting young adults through word of mouth. Many of the young adults told me that they first learned about Consolidated through word of mouth from other young adults who were already attending the church. Scott, the young adult member quoted above, thought that word of mouth was the “biggest” factor in attracting young adults to the church. He remarked, “I think word of mouth is always great, Walt...The biggest thing is word of mouth. Let’s say you met me in Wal-Mart...Where do you go to church? Consolidated. Well, I go to Consolidated. Well, I want to go there.” He explained that “young adults know how to reach to other young adults.”

Jacqueline, a twenty-six-year-old church member, also emphasized that “Consolidated does a really good word of mouth.” Another young adult attending the church put it this way: “Word of mouth is spreading like rapid fire.” Jamal heard about Real Talk, a Bible study designed specifically for young adults on Monday evenings, through “word of mouth.” Clearly, word of mouth is attracting young adults to Consolidated.

Jeremiah, one of the young adult church members, described how he first heard about Consolidated through one of his friends and made the decision to visit the church. He remembered, “One of my friends I met in Lexington told me about Real Talk and the rest is history. I was fed up in indulging in self. Jeremiah, you have to turn over a new leaf. I was excited and amped the first day I got there.” Candice, a church member in her early thirties, also learned about the church in a similar manner, “I learned about Consolidated through other friends.” David, a twenty-two-year-old college student, recalled how he first came to learn about Consolidated through friends at college: “I first attended Consolidated during my first semester here at the University of Kentucky, freshman year, at some time in the second half of 2006. Some older college students who had been here for a while [told me about Consolidated]. It was some University of Kentucky students who had been at Consolidated before. I typically caught a ride going to church...A lot of black college students go to Consolidated.” When students spread the word, it both effectively publicizes Consolidated and encourages attendance together.

Consolidated is also engaging and attracting young adults through technology and social media networks like Facebook and text messaging. Isaac, a twenty-five-year old instructional technology technician, told me he thought the popularity of Real Talk was increased through informal online comments. For example, he said, “I write on my Facebook status that I’m going to Real Talk and other people read that.” Nearly all of the young adults who consistently attend Consolidated are friends with each other on Facebook. Joel, a thirty-year-old church member, recalled how he first heard about Real Talk Bible study at Consolidated. He told this personal story:

I was texting my buddy in Louisville, and it was on a Monday sometime last year. He had never been to Consolidated. I was texting him and he is one of my real good friends. I said, “When I get off work, I might go work out and stuff like that.” He was texting me, he was like, “yeah man, I want to drive down to Real Talk.” I was like, “Where is that?” He was like, “There are a bunch of young adults and students from the University of Kentucky and other schools and they talk about a multitude of topics.” I was like, “Where is it at? ‘Cause I don’t know.” He texted me, “Consolidated.” I said, “That’s where I go.” “It starts at 6:30.” “Hey, I’m going to go see.”

Terry, a twenty-six-year old associate pastor at Consolidated, said, “It’s because the young adults that come tell other young adults, like ‘Aw church was good - you should come’...It takes maybe fifteen minutes to get here from the University of Kentucky. People come, every Sunday.” He emphasized the importance of word of mouth in engaging and attracting other young adults to the church.

2. A substantial number of young adults already present at church

Adam, a twenty-four-year-old young adult minister at Consolidated, emphasized a reoccurring theme running throughout my conversations with young adults: “The more young adults you have—the more likely other young adults will want to come join.” Vincent said that in order for young adults to attend a church they “probably have to already have young adults in attendance at the church.” Craig, a young adult church member, had a similar response “I think you have to have young adults to attract more young adults.” Carl learned about Consolidated from friends previously attending the church. He put it this way, “I had friends there. I knew there were a lot of young adults there. It prompted me to check it out.”

Scott, a twenty-seven-year-old church member, said, “Young adults in the church are able to connect with other young adults. We know what we like, and it is easier for a young adult to know what we like from another young adult as opposed to a fifty-five-year old.” Jeremiah, a twenty-nine-year-old church

member, talked about how “young adults like to hang around a lot of young adults.” He further explained it this way, “Consolidated is definitely drawing a lot of young adults because a lot of young adults like to hang around a lot of young adults - point blank period. What stands out among the young adult Consolidated group is to do community with one another, to help a brother or sister out with one another, and not just be indulged with self, and be a giver.” These responses suggest that the simple raw numbers of young adults can attract more young adults. Clearly, having young adults already as church members is a major factor in attracting young adults.

3. Young adults serving in leadership positions

A number of young adults stated that just having young adults in visible leadership positions can attract other young adults. Shakira, a twenty-four-year-old church member, agreed that it made a difference to have young adults in leadership positions in the church. She specifically mentioned Adam, the twenty-four-year-old young adult minister, as an “appealing” leader in a paid staff position. She said, “If you have a young adult like Adam, it is more appealing.” Adam, a student at a seminary affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, was also identified by Candice as a young adult leader at Consolidated who attracts other young adults to the church. Candice consistently attended Real Talk because the leader of Real Talk was a young adult. She explained, “The fact that Adam knew so much about the Bible and was so young. And it was encouraging to see someone so young, and I wanted to be that way.” Jeffinisha, a twenty-one-year-old church member, also agreed that it makes a difference to have young adults in leadership roles in terms of attracting young adults to the church. She commented, “I think people our age can identify more - if he [the young adult leader] can be completely ‘sold out’ at his age, [as a young adult you begin to think] I can do this—I’m not in this alone.”

Isaac, another young adult church member, also thought that having young adults in leadership roles was important. He reflected, “Yes, I definitely believe that’s a big thing. It shows any young adult that wants to come that it is

not about age. Young adults really want to know the truth of the Bible instead of the traditions that are usually set forth...The truth is the truth and that's what young adults are thirsty for...Especially in Southern Baptist churches where there are a lot of traditions set forth." Katie, a young adult church member, had a similar response: "I think it does [make a difference to have young adults in leadership positions] because it has that generational understanding and being able to meet those needs versus having that separation."

There are four young adults on the administrative staff at Consolidated. As previously mentioned, Adam, a twenty-four-year-old, has perhaps the most visible leadership role among the young adult leaders. He frequently teaches and preaches at the Wednesday night prayer service, provides the announcements during the Sunday morning worship services, and coordinates all the religious activities and fellowships for the young adults at the church. Aaron, a twenty-four-year old youth minister, is also actively involved in leadership roles at Consolidated. He preaches at the Wednesday night prayer service and on occasion delivers the offertory appeal at the worship services on Sunday mornings. Jacqueline, the twenty-six-year-old administrative assistant at the church, coordinates the usage of the church building, manages weddings and special events, and oversees the website. Terry, a twenty-six-year-old associate minister at the church, is one of the leaders of the Men's Ministry and has delivered the corporate Intercessory Prayer at the Sunday worship services.

4. Regularly scheduled activities and events that appeal to young adults.

Consolidated effectively engages young adults through religious activities and fellowship events. During the past year, the young adults organized out-of-town trips to an amusement park in Ohio, a group hike in a Kentucky state park, and a winter skiing trip to West Virginia. Locally, the young adults also planned outings and dinners together for fellowship and mutual support. A trip to a nearby bowling alley, a gathering for pizza at a chain restaurant, and a movie night at a mainstream movie theater were all well-attended events targeted specifically at

young adults. Game nights, involving board games, are held on a regular basis at the home of a young adult church member on weekend nights.

5. Including Christian hip-hop artists in the worship services.

A number of young adults wanted Christian rap artists such as “LaCrae” and “The Truth” included in the style of music used in worship services. Epiphany, a twenty-five-year-old church member, expressed it this way, “There is a lot of new stuff coming out I can talk about with my friends, but you won’t ever see on a Sunday morning. For example, LaCrae, who is a hip-hop artist, has some really great theology. It is really on point.” Another young adult church member at Consolidated echoed her in a similar response: “Contemporary music is where gospel music is going now. Even gospel rap is important...There are some Christian rappers. You have to meet people where they are at. ‘LaCrae’ is awesome and I’ve heard ‘The Truth.’”

Isaac, a twenty-five-year-old who consistently attends Real Talk, also wanted to include more contemporary gospel music, specifically Christian hip-hop artists, in the worship service. He explained,

I heard a poet once say “Our prophets are being perverted by the music industry.” The church is looking at that—“That’s some worldly stuff.” You are losing some people who can influence a generation. There’s a lot of good Christian rappers out there now. I don’t have to always put in Lil’ Wayne or Drake to get my hip hop. I can listen to somebody named “The Truth” or somebody named “LaCrae.” They are talking about situations that I go through and I get it because that’s my generation...Hymnals are not the only way. If they are preaching the Gospel over a hip hop beat - it is still the Gospel. Why don’t you want that in your church?

These comments provide evidence that young adults would like to see more Christian hip-hop artists integrated into the music at worship services.

6. A more contemporary worship service with a young adult choir.

In contrast to the 8:00 and 9:45 worship services, the lively 11:30 service on Sunday mornings at Consolidated more effectively engages and attracts young adults. Adam, the young adult minister, identified two contributing factors in what the 11:30 worship service offers to young adults. He put it this way, “I think for a couple of reasons. One, I believe the service is at 11:30 as opposed to being at 8:00. You will find the older seasoned saints, if you will, are at the 8:00 service. Two, it has been termed unofficially the contemporary service. You have more young adults there. Those two things combined make the 11:30 church an attractive service for young adults.” Mary, an eighteen-year-old church member, described the 11:30 Sunday morning worship service as “awesome” at Consolidated. She explained, “If you can cheer and be hyped for football games then you can give that same energy to God. The worship service is awesome! Because usually every Sunday I am singing in the choir—and you watch people get up and just praise and it’s beautiful. You can see it in their faces...It’s awesome!” Both the later time and the worship style energize young adults.

On a typical Sunday, I have observed that there is more shouting and verbal affirmations from young adults in the choir stand and in the congregation at the 11:30 worship service than the previous services. Victor, a church member in his mid-sixties, pointed out the stylized dancing from the choir members in the choir stand and by young adults in the congregation. He expressed it this way, “When I go to the 11:30 service, the young adult choir is singing and they have ‘the steps’ going. And the young adults in the congregation have ‘the steps’ going.” Jeffinisha, a member of the young adult choir, offered an explanation for why there is more stylized dancing and movement in the young adult choir than the other choirs in the church: “God will not bless mess...When I was out in the clubs, I would go hard. You know what I mean? I was serious. You know what I mean? If I was going all out for the Devil—then I should go all out for Christ. That is the mentality of a lot of those people in the young adult choir.” At the 11:30 worship service, young adults enjoy the enthusiastic worship style.

7. A talented preacher who relates to the lives of young adults

Part of the reason for the effective engagement of young adults at Consolidated is embedded within the congregational history of the church. In the past, the senior pastor took advantage of the church's proximity to a large university campus. The old location of the church was within one block of five large freshman dormitories and the student center on campus. The university's student center also houses the Martin Luther King, Jr. Cultural Center, a popular gathering place for African-American college students to study and socialize with one another. Because many of the incoming freshman students did not have cars on campus, African-American freshman college students walked one block with their friends to the old church location on Sunday mornings. The young adults at the old location who made the transition to the new church location were instrumental in continuing to attract and engage more young adults.

In addition, the senior pastor at Consolidated then, Pastor Richard Gaines, occasionally walked around the campus, greeting college students and inviting them to visit the church. Many of the young adults who were attracted to Consolidated's old church location through meeting Pastor Gaines on the university campus made the transition to the new location when the church moved. In short, the new location of the church benefited greatly from the fact that young adults were already attending the new location.

Many of the young adults reported the most important draw for them was the preaching of Pastor Richard Gaines. Shakira, a twenty-four-year-old church member, enjoyed the preaching of Pastor Gaines. She said, "We knew how awesome Pastor Gaines was...He has a way of preaching to everybody...His message is appealing to young adults. It is a big church, but it still has a small feel." According to Jameisha, Pastor Gaines's central message of "Think Big" is helpful in ameliorating the stressful lives of young adults. She explained, "With

young adults having so many stressors going on, Pastor Gaines saying, “Think Big’ is helpful. I know it has been helpful to me. Sometimes you can get so caught up in your circumstances, you can’t think beyond that.” Jeffinisha, a twenty-one-year-old church member, described her first visit to the church: “My first impression of Consolidated was sitting to listening to Pastor Gaines and saying ‘Man, that is the Word!’” Jamal, a young adult, was attracted to Consolidated partly because of the “dynamic” preaching of Pastor Gaines. He said, “I heard about the church and a couple of people I knew said Reverend Gaines was really dynamic.”

All of these factors combine to reach the young adults who attend Consolidated Baptist Church, making the experience of an old historic church meaningful to young adults in their own terms. Scott cleverly summarized the importance of being relevant to young adults with this statement: “We can’t be an eight-track ministry in an iPod generation.”

¹ With the exception of Pastor Gaines, all names are pseudonyms.