

# **Diversity and Spirituality Drive Young Adults at New Life Fellowship**

***Richard Cimino***

*New School for Social Research*

Without extensive marketing or programming, New Life Fellowship in Elmhurst, Queens, NY, has managed to draw a growing number of young adults to its congregation housed in an imposing former Elks lodge on Queens Boulevard. Located in one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the United States, if not the world, New Life appears even more diverse than its surroundings on Sunday mornings—another feat accomplished without much initial planning.

“You won’t see this church big on marketing or promotion. God has brought people here by the sheer honesty of our community,” said Pastor Rich Villodas, a teaching pastor at New Life who oversees the young adult community. As Villodas suggests, the spiritual vitality and community life of New Life go a long way in explaining both New Life’s diversity and its appeal to young adults. This non-denominational church is something of a pioneer in evangelical circles for integrating what its leaders call “emotionally healthy spirituality,” multiethnic diversity, and contemplative spirituality. To understand each of these components and how they relate to the young adult ministry, we have to go back to the beginnings of New Life.

## **A Church Grows in Queens**

New Life Fellowship was started by Pastor Pete Scazzero in 1987. The church was founded in the largely Hispanic section of Corona in central Queens as a house church. From the beginning, there was an emphasis on small groups and reaching out to the downtrodden. Within three years, the congregation grew to 300. Then the church entered a difficult period in the early 1990s, as Scazzero started having marriage problems and emotional burnout in his ministry. He and

his wife, Geri, who helped start the church, underwent marriage counseling and took a sabbatical from the church.

When they returned in 1996, the Scazzeros had embarked on the program of emotionally healthy spirituality. The basic teaching of this philosophy is that emotional health and spiritual health are inseparable, with one inevitably affecting the other. Initially, this led to a strong family and marriage ministry, an emphasis still present in the church today. For the 32-year-old Villodas and his ministry, the turn to emotionally healthy spirituality has meant “embracing the whole gospel, not just outreach and evangelism but also discipleship and formation....We don’t preach to give information or inspiration, but the preaching is for formation—we want people changed.” By 1993 the church had relocated to Elmhurst and was worshipping in the former Elks Club, a large historic building that New Life bought in 2003. New Life has grown rapidly, eventually reaching an attendance of about 1,200 on Sundays, with members and attendees coming from Asian, Hispanic, African-American and White backgrounds, almost in equal proportions.

Scazzero struggled with the question of how to cultivate an emotionally healthy spirituality for his diverse congregation. He started studying and visiting various kinds of Christian communities and how they practiced spirituality. He experienced contemplative and monastic practices and concepts and thought they could deepen the congregation’s spirituality through regular prayer and meditation. Such practices could encourage members to slow down their pace of life and seek God in silence during their busy daily schedules in a frenetic city. The church took on the *Rule of Life*: an ancient monastic tradition adapted by New Life to provide members with a concise summary of emotionally healthy and contemplative practices that could serve as a “framework for freedom, providing healthy boundaries while leaving plenty of room for flexibility and individuality,” according to the church’s web site.

New Life has always been eclectic and pragmatic in its approach, but the new practices raised the question of “How do we follow the rhythms of monasticism while retaining an evangelical identity in terms of mission and

evangelism?” according to Villodas. The church has not been hesitant to introduce other practices into its repertoire. During the spring of 2010, the church inaugurated a series of sermons on the biblical roots of the Sabbath. At each service, the pastors encouraged members to make a commitment to observe a day of rest and contemplation but to tailor it to their own needs. After each service, candles and shirts with “SABBATH” emblazoned on them were sold to members and attendees.

The innovations that Scazzero introduced have filtered down to the various levels of the church through concerted effort by its pastors and other leaders. However, reaching out to young adults as a distinct group did not figure prominently at New Life until fairly recently. This is because young adults have been active in the church from the beginning, especially young families and married couples, but the decision was made to put a pastor in charge of young adults about seven years ago. According to Villodas, who has held this position for two years, the purpose of the new position was to “connect young adults together to worship and serve the church and community, while being a pastoral presence to them.” The young adult ministry is geared toward those between 18 and 30, but it has a subgroup called Crossroads for the college-aged. There has been an influx of young adults to New Life in the last four or five years, corresponding with a large Asian population moving into Elmhurst. Today New Life has approximately 300 young adults on its mailing list, which accounts for about 25 percent of church’s total of 1,200 attendees. Over the course of nine months, I observed events at New Life and interviewed staff and attendees to learn more about what the church is doing right. In this essay, I highlight five strategies that have enabled New Life to become a vibrant church home for young adults.

### **Cultivating Community and Leadership**

New Life offers events, gatherings and groups where young adults can connect and build social ties. They range from parties to picnics. The church recently started a coffee house ministry, where musicians and artists showcase their talents and attendees hear about social justice issues in the neighborhood and

city. Young adult retreats have been in place for the last five to seven years, but the main way that young adults integrate into New Life is through involvement in small groups. There are about 60 small groups scattered throughout the city. The groups provide a sense of community for single young adults in a big church and an often lonely city. It is through the small groups where many of the practices and concepts presented in sermons, as well as the *Rule of Life* in general, are discussed and digested. In many small groups, members often conduct Bible studies or read and discuss a relevant book, as well as engaging in prayer and sharing of concerns. A 29-year-old attendee recounted in an interview how he was new to New York and first got involved with a small group before attending services at New Life. “They were total strangers...but I found the group really welcoming. You can get lost in the shuffle at a large church like New Life. But by the time I attended services everything went a lot smoother. They would introduce me to their friends, so I fell into this huge network of people,” he said.

The small groups also cultivate many of young adult leaders who are eventually dispersed throughout the congregation. Villodas estimates as many as 50 young adult leaders in the church, many of whom are mentored in small groups by “coaches,” experienced small group leaders. Two of the four teaching pastors are in their early 30s, as are the youth director and the director of the church’s Community Development Center. “When young adults, especially the unchurched, see other young adults in leadership I think it demystifies the traditional direction of many churches that in order to be in leadership you have to have grey hair or be in the church for a long time. Young adults might see this as an empowerment thing—I can be in my 20s and be in leadership,” Villodas said. In a similar way, the membership process at New Life is relatively easy, comprised of an introductory member class and public reception at one of the services. The ease of access to leadership positions and membership, as well as the commitment generated in small groups has led New Life young adults to be active financial supporters of the church. While some young adults may associate mainly with those in their age group, it was not unusual for cross-generational ties to form between members of different ages, particularly when they were involved in common endeavors and projects, such as volunteer work.

## **Worship and Preaching Valued**

The services at New Life are informal, passionate and colorful, with the church showing its diversity of ethnicity and ages through its choice of music. One Sunday the church will have rap in its musical repertoire and the next it will feature contemporary praise music, an old hymn and an Irish jig. Young adults are strongly represented in the worship team, choir and band. A 23-year-old college student who has attended for five years said he decided to make New Life his church because he was “extremely attracted to the worship. There’s a lot of choice. There’s people singing, dancing, and praising. When they worship, you know they want to be there and want to worship. The church promotes that feeling of joy in the worship.”

Along with the music, the sermons have a down-to-earth and relevant quality, often applying the biblical text to today’s issues. A recent sermon on a passage in the book of Jeremiah was entitled, “I Love New York.” The pastor explained how just as the ancient Israelites were called to cultivate the city of Babylon while they were in exile from Jerusalem Christians today must seek the welfare of New York City. A participant in Crossroads said he likes the sermons because “they give directions about why we should do things, but not what things we should do. They [provide] a framework, a guide, not a set of rules.” The fact that sermons are now promptly placed on the church’s website, in both video and text formats, also makes New Life’s message accessible to young adults. The pastors also use Twitter to keep in touch with members, with a teaching pastor tweeting during services.

## **Embracing Brokenness and Healing**

The emphasis on emotionally healthy spirituality at New Life often includes a call to embrace brokenness and grace—concepts that are appealing to the young adults I interviewed. They agreed that the church allows the space and provides the resources for emotional healing in areas of relationships, addictions, and other problems. The message has particularly found a hearing among second-generation Americans, the children of immigrants, who feel that the churches of

their upbringing had too many rules and traditions that hindered a healthy spiritual life. A 29-year-old man said, “New Life attracts a lot of people from the Asian-American community who are experiencing burnout in service to the church, who are feeling like there are unhealthy things in the culture mixed in with the Gospel message...So New Life has become a haven for a lot of young adults who, because we’re coming to the 25-35 ages when what’s called a ‘quarter-life crisis’ is more common, are seeing New Life as a place of healing and transformation.”

But most young adults, regardless of ethnicity, are drawn to the way in which the church and its leaders disassociate themselves from a “holier-than-thou” image and honestly speak about their flaws. A 33-year-old woman said that the church “allows me to be openly broken and in grief. It provides me [with] a safe environment to sort through my brokenness and to work on it within a community that is attempting to do the same thing.” The call to live by grace was translated by the young adults to mean that one should be non-judgmental and accepting of others.

### **Building on Diversity**

While New Life did not intentionally pursue ethnic diversity, the congregation has been intentional about building upon its inclusiveness. The church’s four pastors are Asian, Hispanic, African-American, and White, male and female. New Life has recently held a racial reconciliation seminar, bringing in outside speakers to address questions about how to deal with ethnic divisions and differences. The church has also committed itself to being more multicultural in its worship and music. The appeal of New Life’s diversity and its emphasis on emotional health were often interrelated for the young adults I interviewed. A 29-year-old professional said that when she first visited the church, it “was not like anywhere I every visited before. I looked around the room and saw everyone from different places literally, not just a token two people from somewhere else. I also felt the sense of freedom that the people had and felt like I could just be there and experience God and not worry about what I look like and what people think about me.”

Another practice that resonated with a large segment of the young adults was the inclusion of women in leadership positions, exemplified by the roles of Geri Scazzero as teaching pastor and Jackie Snape as executive pastor. The congregation has been forthright in calling for equal roles for women in the church, both in preaching and in other areas of church life.

## **Planning for Growth Amid Obstacles**

Along with the spontaneous and unstructured aspects of New Life Fellowship, it is obvious that a measure of planning and even packaging and branding has been important in the church's growth. This is especially the case with emotionally healthy spirituality, which is the subject of pastors' conferences, books and CDs (always sold on display tables after services). The church's turn to contemplative spirituality and Sabbath observance, which is still rare in most evangelical congregations, has likewise taken a fair degree of promotion and intentionality to catch the interest of members. While young adults have benefited from these practices, a segment of them expressed concern that basic Christian teachings may be overshadowed by these newer innovations. Since unchurched young adults are increasingly religiously unschooled, it may be difficult to translate emotionally healthy and monastic spirituality for those having basic questions about God and Christianity.

Another obstacle the New Life young adult ministry faces is to sustain its growth among a transient demographic group that may move on to other congregations once they have dealt with crises or personal issues. To continue its successful young adult ministry, New Life will have to be more intentional in reaching out to seekers with the Christian message in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Church leaders who are concerned about drawing young adults in diverse settings can learn a good deal from New Life Fellowship. The church has been fortunate to find itself in the center of one of the most diverse areas of the country. Yet plenty of churches in diverse neighborhoods do not reflect such diversity in their

pews. New Life represents a segment of evangelical churches that have found that the Christian message and enthusiastic sharing of the faith creates spiritual unity between people beyond racial and cultural barriers and across generations. The church, however, recognizes that working on both spiritual and emotional issues and obstacles are necessary to sustain such a diverse community. The ability to maintain a core identity, even if it can be quite eclectic as in the case of New Life, while innovating in the non-core areas of a tradition, may be essential for long-term congregational growth and stability. For instance, New Life has retained a firm evangelical identity on its beliefs about the Bible and the person of Christ while adopting spiritual practices that are Catholic (contemplative prayer) and Jewish (the Sabbath) in origin. New Life demonstrates that congregations can mine their own traditions and borrow from others to find the best practices and resources in welcoming the hard-to-reach young adult age group into the life of the church.