

Generation X-cited

Contrary to the stereotype, young adults are excited about their Catholic faith

BY LINDA THOMAS

You've likely heard Washington is one of the four most "unchurched" states in the nation along with Oregon, Idaho and Montana.

An often quoted American Religious Identification Survey, conducted in 2001, found 25-percent of Washington's residents have no religious affiliation.

But some Catholic leaders who work with young people are noticing a growing interest in religion – especially in service work.



Jenny Resendez (left) and Frances both work with young adults through the Seattle Archdiocese's Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry. They find young people want to learn about their faith and they are committed to the Church.

Photo: Linda Thomas

"They are interested in learning about their faith, they're very committed to the Church, and many of them want to be involved in ministry," said Frances Farrell, director of special events and service programming for the Office for Youth and Young Adult Ministry.

The Archdiocese of Seattle created OYYAM in 2004 to serve youth, young adults and the leaders who minister to them.

Farrell has noticed a difference between her generation – people born between 1963 and 1978, generally referred to as Generation X – and those who followed.

The young people OYYAM works with often have a "deeper sense of

spirituality and attraction to devotional things” than her peers who are in their early 40s, she said.

In June, Farrell will take college-age students to El Salvador for an education and service experience with Catholic Relief Services. One goal with the trip is to help young people “learn about discipleship and justice” and then use those skills where there are needs in the local area.

Culture of choice

While many young adults are great examples of involved, spiritual Catholics, there are also those who don’t think about religion.

Jesuit Father Thomas Rausch has been teaching in a university setting for 32 years. He’s currently teaching a course at Seattle University called “Catholic Traditions.”

“They don’t know Catholic traditions very well. They certainly don’t know Catholic theology, and they don’t always know Catholic stories,” Fr. Rausch observed.

And he believes young Catholics in the Seattle-area aren’t as religious as those in Los Angeles, where he is a theology professor at Loyola Marymount University.

Father Rausch said students are living in a “culture of choice.” The immigrant Catholicism that shaped many adults and their parents is no longer present. It has been replaced by an “extremely individualistic culture.”

“People are constantly on their cell phones, iPods, or computers,” said Father Rausch.

“When it comes to Catholicism, the wired generation likes to pick and chose which doctrines or traditions are important to them and create their own identities like they’re filling an iPod.”

Though concerned about their current values, Father Rausch said young people who do become involved with the Church make great leaders. “They’re tolerant, accepting and creative,” he added.

What young adults want

The challenge for some parishes has been keeping young people interested in their church communities.

What are young adults looking for in a Mass?

They want the priests’ homilies to directly relate to the every day struggles in their lives, according to a survey from the Center for Ministry Development (CMD).

The Catholic nonprofit organization provides training and resources to dioceses. They will conduct a seminar in Seattle this fall called "Opening the Parish Door to Young Adults."

"A priest who can make the Gospel a 21st century reality, and not just for families, is what young people look for the most," said Joan Weber, a consultant with the CMD. "They want to know how to live the Gospel in their lives."

The number one reason young adults give for not going to Mass, according to Weber's research, is that they didn't have anyone to go with.

They are "eclectic individuals," Webber said, but they also want to belong to a community.

Weber has one piece of advice for parishes and organizations who are trying to attract young adult Catholics. Don't be patronizing.

A phrase that is sure to annoy them is: "Youth and young adults are the future of the Church." They are a present part of the Church, she pointed out.

"They are engaging, smart, willing to serve," Weber said, "and just like everyone else, they want a closer connection with their faith."