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The young and the faithless

How organized religion is trying to bring them back

By Lyndsie Bourgon, CBC News

Jessica Ellison didn't feel much connection to her Jewish background before this year.

"I didn't really have any Jewish friends and I didn't think I fit into the Jewish faith," says the 20-year-old Dalhousie University sociology student. "I never really thought about being Jewish."

And she's far from alone. Young adults have the weakest attachment to organized religion — almost half of Canadians between 15 and 29 rarely or never go to religious services, or practice religion privately, Statistics Canada says.

But many religious groups across the country are struggling to change that, using innovative ways to attract new followers.

For Ellison, a trip to Israel helped spark her interest in her faith. Her journey was paid for by Taglit-Birthright Israel, a program funded by the Israeli government and Jewish philanthropists.

It sends youth of Jewish lineage on a 10-day trip to Israel. Organizers say there are no pre-requisites regarding faith before or after the trip.



Cultural immersion

She went for the perks of a free trip, but Ellison was surprised by how she identified with Israel and with Jewish traditions.

"I got along with the people, and I felt I identified with them," she says. "The way they worded it was that you're not going to Israel as a tourist, you're going as a pilgrim."

And she continued to connect with Judaism after she returned home.

"I had all these friends at Dalhousie who were Jewish and we talked about Israel, which made me feel more Jewish," she says. "It ties you to [the] Jewish faith more than Jewish worship. I think if it was any other way you wouldn't feel as strongly when you get back."

That's the point, says Birthright spokeswoman Jessica Rosenblum.

The program "grows out of a concern that — Jews are less concerned, knowledgeable, and interested in their faith," Rosenblum says. "It's a way to give people common basis for building more in their faith."

There is evidence that this immersion-style approach seems to work.

A study done by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies found that, in 2002-2003, 26 per cent of students from North America who had gone on the BirthRight trip became involved in Jewish activities on campus.

In the rest of the Jewish student population, only eight per cent of students were active on campus.

'Coolness' of worship


Kathy Little, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, says that even though religious worship is declining, young people haven't shunned religion entirely.

"They're making faith more private," she explains. "Religious worship is not going away, but it's shifting."

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That's what Rev. Patrick O'Dea, of the Roman Catholic Newman Centre and Parish at the University of Toronto, wants to change.

"It's what we call evangelism ... not necessarily making faith a private matter," the priest says.

Evangelism is often associated with zealous preaching and outrageous television personalities in the public imagination. But in practice, religious groups are using subtler methods to attract youth, often using pop culture and the web.

"[They're] trying to co-opt youth to bring people in," says Prof. Randy Boyagoda of Ryerson University. "The focus is not on God, it's on the coolness of worshipping God."

Changing the world

Is a desire to change the world part of that "coolness"? Some religious organizations think so, and are thus creating programs that focus on volunteer service and charity work.

The United Church of Canada has established a "Year of Service" program, in which church youth go on volunteer trips to expose themselves to developing countries.

The Catholic Church promotes World Youth Day to young members, complete with celebrations and sermons about Catholicism. This year, a group of pilgrims from Ontario, Alberta, and Nova Scotia are participating in "Joyful Visitation 2008," during which they will travel to World Youth Day in Australia.

Young Muslims Canada takes a similar approach, focusing their efforts on community and development.

National coordinator Syed Reza says his group's Feed the Streets and Adopt a Park programs bring youth closer to Islam through the draw of doing good.

That includes young people who are removed from religion. Reza says that Young Muslims Canada is "trying to reassert what Islam is through activities."

Taking to the airwaves

Young people are knocking on religious doors, says Rev. Harry Oussoren, executive minister with the United Church of Canada.

"There are places where creativity is bubbling up," he says. "The stats [on youth church attendance] are negative, but there is a lot of energy and reaching out to focus on."

A recent push to encourage young people to take a second look at the United Church of Canada is a series of youth-friendly advertisements that portray the church as inclusive and modern.

In one television commercial called "Ejector Pew," a young single mother and a gay couple are sitting on church pews. One by one, the pews shoot them out of their seats and out of the church. A voice-over says that all people, no matter who they are, are welcome at the United Church.

The ads direct readers to the Wondercafe website, home to discussion boards and poll questions on religious issues. A striking aspect of Wondercafe is that if the user doesn't look hard enough, they might not realize that the United Church sponsors the site.

Will it bring youth back?

But religious leaders say that it is too early to tell whether these efforts will help to increase the number of young people involved in various churches and faiths.

"It's to get their attention," says Oussoren. "Whether it has engaged people as much, I don't know, I hope it has. It has gotten people interested in talking."

Liddle, the sociology professor at U of T, says that in the gay and lesbian community, people have been talking.

"Christian organizations that want to be welcoming [to gays and lesbians] have to go through training and get a designation," she explains. "I'm impressed with the number of groups making strides to catch the eyes of those who have been cut off."

"Accommodation [of different groups] can be used as a way to bring up numbers," says Liddle, mentioning churches that use rock music to attract members.

But Boyagoda of Ryerson says techniques like ads and music are off the mark. "I think we underestimate the youth population by thinking we have to speak to their everyday lives and how they live, when we should be offering something radically different."

He thinks the use of rock music won't last long. "I went to a service in Boston and it was a packed church," he explains. "The priest was a nice but intense guy who conducted a beautiful service, without drum solos."

In the compromise between lifestyle and worship, "some people will never go back," says Liddle. "It depends on finding that match that works between faith and commitment."



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"One thing I hope for is that people keep asking God their hardest questions." — *Geoff Rousseau*

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