

## Growing Rural Churches Young: Yellowstone-Whitworth Partnership DREAM Grant Pt 2, text

Guided by our presbytery's vision statement, goals and the pressing needs of our congregations and their communities in this area, Yellowstone's Leadership Cabinet and Pastoral Ministry Team (COM) voted priority and support of this *growing young* initiative, a presbytery wide emphasis with trained student Fellows working more intensively in and with some of our congregations. Based on the last 2 years here of relationships, work, and learnings from in-depth research into many of our churches and communities, plus creative experiments in a few congregations, we unearthed these root needs and hopes and demonstrated the powerful, catalytic role of student leaders helping to lead a transformative growth process from WITHIN churches and the presbytery.

When asked if *Growing Rural Churches Young*, meant growing youth/young adults as *lifelong* followers of Christ or churches retaining and empowering younger people or growing vital churches and members who serve and attract youth/young adults and families in the community, we answered, "YES, all of the above!"

Given that important *what*, then *how*?

Leading expert Christian Smith, Ph.D. at University of Notre Dame, head of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSE), and author of *Soul Searching* and *Lost in Transition*, praised the extensive research and recommendations of the newly released project/book, *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to help young people discover and love your church*, as "practical answers" based on serious empirical research. I know of no book quite like it. So we looked further. Extensively studying over 250 churches (Presbyterians listed as the second largest pool along with a wide range of mainline, plus some catholic, nondenominational) the solid, rigorous research and theology with practical strategies are drawing affirmation from Princeton's Kenda Creasy Dean, author of *Almost Christian*, "At last! This book is for the church," PCUSA's Associate for collegiate ministry, Jason Santos, and a wide range of voices. "Growing Young will become the classic text for churches that are committed to living into their call to be the body of Christ for every generation," Chap Clark, professor, youth, family and culture, author of *Hurt*.

Our *Growing Rural Churches Young* partnership provides an important experimental opportunity to: 1. equip and *grow rural churches young* by adapting this latest research for *our* rural contexts (1); 2. empower and disciple college student fellows serving as catalytic change-agents, leaders and partners in selected churches, 3. equip churches to listen to and missionally address spiritual, relational and social justice needs of children/youth/families in their contexts of rural/small town Montana; and 4. develop an innovative model where students, churches, a presbytery (Yellowstone) and Presbyterian University (Whitworth) partner in this transformational mission. Whitworth University (covenant partner affiliation with PCUSA) Office of Church Engagement's Ekklesia summer Fellows Program, would partner with the presbytery and selected churches to identify, train, place, support and follow up student fellows who then serve as catalytic partners in rural churches for *growing young* as described below.

1. Equip and grow rural churches young, guided by the best, latest research, released 9/16 (1). This research is integrated into congregationally friendly materials containing stories, ideas, processes, action plans, tips for older generations to talk meaningfully with teens/young adults, questions and an online assessment tool. *What matters most? Relationships, empathy, community, and Jesus.* The six strategies are: A. Leadership that equips and empowers: leaders entrust others with access and authority, equipping and empowering *all* generations including teens/emerging adults to help influence and shape a church. B. Step into their shoes; empathize with today's young people as they grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and purpose; as they experience "systemic abandonment" due to divorce and the self-absorbed adults around them; and as they act out a desire for connection. C. Take Jesus' Message Seriously: all ages welcome youth/young people and families into and embody a Jesus-centered community and way of life. They want to be engaged, taught and *challenged* to go deeper in Christian faith by churches inspiring

them to reflect and act. This inspiration flows from leaders who model authenticity and humility and extend the *challenge* of following Christ not from a place of superiority or power, but out of an invitation to *pursue* the way of Jesus *together*. D. Fuel a Warm Community: Warm is the new cool; authenticity and warm peer and intergenerational relationships triumph over worship style or programs. Welcoming, belonging, accepting, hospitable, and caring describe the culture of these churches. E. Prioritize Young People and Families Everywhere: These churches' disproportionate prioritization of young people and families breathed life into ALL ages and the whole church. Involving young people in conversations and every ministry has allowed these churches to thrive with authenticity and intergenerational relationships. F. Be the Best Neighbors: In churches *growing young*, the community accepts the difficult task of offering young people thoughtful examples and opportunities to love neighbors well. They encourage and provide varied missional opportunities for teens, emerging adults and families to embody Christ locally and globally.

### 2. Empower and disciple college students as catalytic change-agents, leaders and partners in churches.

While bringing in outsiders who are so young for such a role is risky, the presbytery staff, leadership and churches believe it is a calculated risk that is worth taking because of the urgent needs to disciple young adults and *grow rural churches young* and because of our previous positive partnership experiences with Whitworth Fellows in our midst. Whitworth's Ekklesia Program works with Yellowstone and recruits, selects, places and trains the Fellows - an extensive 3 month training in: integration of spiritual disciplines into rhythms of daily life; understanding and practicing study of Scripture and sharing the Gospel contextually; discerning spiritual gifts, skills and calling; and developing several adaptive skills for ministry (syllabus available). Yellowstone provides relational discipling/mentoring (Luke 9, 10; I Thes. 1, 2) from Co-GPs and church leaders and applies and expands upon their training in their unique rural ministry contexts.

3. Equip churches to listen to and missionally address spiritual, relational, and social justice needs of children/youth/families in their contexts of rural/small town Montana as a result of the mindset and practices embedded in the 6 *growing young* strategies above. The presbytery will work to reinforce this. The increased needs and risks of rural/small town America and her children/youth/families, economies and churches are urgent. Montana's suicide rate stays in the top 4 in the nation. Encouraged and equipped by Yellowstone Co-General Presbyters, pastors and lay leaders, and these ministry fellows in *growing young* (see above), our congregations learn to better listen to and respond missionally to the needs listed above. *Growing Young* churches qualify as the "authoritative communities" which can serve to help strengthen the fabric of small communities and to provide for the authentic community and connections which research shows can heal at-risk youth and support healthy families and relationships. (See research & recommendations: *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities 2*)

4. Develop an experimental, innovative model where students, congregations, a presbytery and Presbyterian University (Whitworth) partner in this transformational mission. We will use two-way learning, ongoing adaptations, feedback and evaluation of the overall initiative and our learnings, and the *growing young* online assessment tools for accountability to measure accomplishments (1).

A DREAM initiative is in keeping with Yellowstone's vision and history of seeking adaptive ways to be faithful and fruitful in our post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century context, whether piloting materials for the Evangelism staff in Louisville or developing one of the first UKIRK ministries. The Methodist church selected Montana/Wyoming as THE area to test and adapt ministry for the changed future reality of the US where the church is on the margins.

Yellowstone's Vision and DNA include:

a. Being, growing as Christ-like disciple community incorporating spiritual practices in all aspects of our life together.

- b. Equipping disciple-making, disciple-sending congregations and leaders, including younger ones
- c. a growing priority on reaching, making, equipping young disciples and their families & serving communities
- d. being a sent people to go out and join Christ in Christ's mission
- e. The priority and practice of collaborations/partnerships in our relationally based culture in Montana.

Whitworth and Yellowstone agree that fellows should serve in pairs in light of the rural, isolated communities, previous experience and Christ's example. We anticipate 6-8 fellows living with host families for 10 weeks, June 1 to August 15, serving 1-3 churches per pair, depending on distance, multi-church parishes

Our lean budget can be as low as it is since we are blessed by commitment, quite a few -in kind contributions and donated time from many across the presbytery, and Whitworth's OCE. The DREAM grant monies are necessary to provide for the 1.5 to 2 years of planning, evaluation of church sites, administration, leadership, training, support, oversight, follow up and travel across Big Sky country as our presbytery stretches over 600 miles, more than the distance between Washington DC and Chicago! With Yellowstone's Co-General Presbyters only half time and fewer full time pastors in our churches, faithful but stretched thin for resources in rural communities, the presbytery and congregations already have ambitious goals for contributing. With Whitworth's high demand from sites for ministry fellows, their Lilly grant funds can now only provide \$1,000-\$1,500 of the \$3,000 stipend per fellow. Yellowstone and the fellows must raise the remainder. Our five income streams are listed on our form.

We are optimistic about this moving in a sustainable direction based on the positive, transformative -results in other churches; the deep, lasting qualitative changes these strategies bring in the leadership and culture of congregations; the openness, curiosity and enthusiasm expressed by a wide range of folks here: and Whitworth's Director of the Office of Church Engagement's assessment that is, "a much bigger idea than simply one [year] for one presbytery." So, we step out in faith and hope.

Yellowstone's staff, Leadership Cabinet, PMT (COM), quite a few churches and lay leaders are excited about: the multi-faceted formal and informal benefits of this *Growing Rural Churches Young Partnership* with the catalytic impact of fellows embedded in churches and helping at our summer camps; how this fits with goals and hopes of the Leadership Cabinet, PMT and many churches, pastors and ministry leaders to position their churches to engage younger generations in a way that breathes vitality, life, and energy into the *whole* church.; rich benefits Whitworth OCE and faculty bring to the partnership; and to implement our 2 years of research and learnings in a partnership we think has great potential not only for us but also to share more broadly in our synod and beyond. We understand that such a partnership requires leadership buy in. This partnership has the whole-hearted support of the Co-General Presbyters.

1. <http://churchesgrowingyoung.com>
2. <http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/hwexsumm.pdf>

"What's irresistible about *Growing Young* is that it's not primarily about age--it's about hope. Through story after compelling story, the authors demonstrate how prioritizing the young is a *church*-changing strategy, and how pursuing Jesus by 'growing young' fundamentally changes the ways congregations interact with their communities and their leaders, as well as with youth and adults. With refreshing candor, this book blows the sanctuary doors open thanks to its insistence on following Christ in a way that prioritizes listening, empathy, and care for *all* young people and families, not just the Christian ones. This book is for the church. At last."

**Kenda Creasy Dean, Princeton Seminary**