NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Different generations of progressive Catholic leaders need deeper collaboration

Jamie Manson | Sep. 19, 2013 Grace on the Margins

When I'm not home stressing over my weekly column or poring over book publishers' catalogs, I often spend my weekends on the road speaking to various faith communities about a variety of topics related to the church. Given that I'm still in my 30s, it's not surprising I'm most often asked to speak about young adults and the future of faith.

That's what I was up to this past weekend, when I joined a number of speakers from an older generation to talk about the topic of ministry to youth and young adults.

The night before my presentation, I had the pleasure of having dinner with one of my heroes in the progressive church movement, a rare opportunity even for someone like me who appears with some frequency at conferences largely populated by an older generation.

At one point during our meal, my hero, an elder prophet, voiced what is becoming a common concern among the older generation: Who will carry on our work? Will the new generation bring our same spirit to the ministry?

I explained that there are a number of young adult Catholics doing exceptional work in church reform and in ministry to the marginalized who are eager to form meaningful relationships with spiritual and activist leaders from the older generation. One of the most crucial ways to seek answers to these questions is through dialogue. Yet connecting the generations continues to be a challenge.

I know I do not only speak for myself when I say that many young adults with an interest in faith and spirituality have a strong desire to be in dialogue and relationship with spiritual mentors.

Most young adults in the United States grew up in a culture that was far more individualistic than communal. Many of us have divorced parents, and perhaps even more of us were not raised with grandparents or older, extended family members living close by.

So the desire for spiritual elders and a supportive, nurturing community is acute among many 20- and 30-somethings, perhaps even more than any preceding generation.

The irony is that while older generations of progressive Catholics fret that their decades of hard work will be lost on the next generation, the next generation of progressive Catholics often wander around looking for substantive, lasting connections with elder prophets and spiritual leaders.

Non-Catholic, progressive Christians seem to have a better track record of linking the older and younger generations.

As I have noted previously in *NCR* [1], progressive evangelicals like Jim Wallis have made a point of raising the profile of the new generation of evangelical progressives by discussing their work in public forums, sharing

the stage with them, and even writing the forwards or epilogues to their new publications.

But both public and private collaborations among progressive young adults and elder Catholics, though slowly on the rise, continue to be rare. (This year's national Call to Action conference, to its credit, will feature several intergenerational sessions.)

Not 48 hours after that dinner conversation with one of my spiritual heroes, I had the chance to see an example of an intergenerational collaboration on full display.

On Monday, I attended a program at New York City's Open Center that featured a dialogue between Matthew Fox and Adam Bucko. The pair was promoting *Occupy Spirituality*, a new book written as a conversation between the two of them. (Since the book is slated for review in *NCR* in October, I won't delve into its contents here.)

Fox, 72, is world-renowned for his more than 30 books on spirituality, the mystics and the church, as well as his well-publicized expulsion from the Dominican order and his ongoing critique of the Roman Catholic church hierarchy.

I've written about Bucko [2], 38, previously, and for the sake of full disclosure, he was my classmate and fellow theology major at St. John's University in Jamaica, N.Y. He is the co-founder of the Reciprocity Foundation, a groundbreaking program that empowers New York City's homeless youth to break the cycle of poverty.

Given the depth of their respective experiences, both Fox and Bucko had many insights to share. What was even more moving for me, however, was the sight of an accomplished spiritual elder in his early 70s and an emerging spiritual activist in his mid-30s sharing a stage and a dialogue about spirituality and the future of religious communities.

Both of them agreed that their collaboration was successful because Fox was willing to listen to Bucko with care and allowed Bucko equal time to talk and share his thoughts.

"I delight in young people," Fox told the audience, "and I'm eager to learn from them."

Bucko said he has a number of mentors from various religious traditions, including Buddhism, Sufism and Hinduism. Even though many of these elders are eager to connect with the next generation, he still "had to work hard" to find and build relationships with mentors.

"I take my life and my calling seriously," Bucko said, "and I know that I can't do this on my own. I need the wisdom of the elders. I need their spiritual guidance. I need their support and their prayers."

By working with Bucko, Fox has not only helped mentor someone from the new generation of spiritual activists, he is also introducing Bucko to his own audience, which is mostly from the older generation. Bucko's life and work will no doubt inspire and comfort older, progressive people of faith. As an added bonus, many of them might also introduce Bucko to their own children.

In my own speaking on the road, I run into countless parents of 20- and 30-something Catholics who struggle to discuss faith and spirituality with their adult children. They understand why their kids are not interested in the institutional church but worry they do not have access to substantive theological and spiritual ideas.

If our spiritual and prophetic elders mentor and raise the profiles of emerging spiritual leaders and activists to their own audiences, there is a good chance they will also be introduced to a new generation who, though spiritually hungry, are disaffected by organized religion.

Though they may not be interested in church attendance, many 20- and 30-somethings will likely be compelled by the justice work and the community-building of young progressive Catholics.

In this continuing age of Catholic orthodoxy, we know the institutional church will not support or promote the work of young progressive Catholics. The need for substantive collaborations between elders and young adults is therefore crucial.

It is especially urgent to promote the ideas and the work of the Catholic women who are emerging spiritual leaders and activists. (In the case of young progressive evangelicals, for example, the field is dominated by young male voices. Catholic progressives must continue to be diligent in avoiding the same pitfalls.)

Rather than expending energy worrying about what the future of faith and spirituality might be, aging spiritual leaders and those emerging from the new generation must enter into true dialogue, marked by respectful listening, an appreciation for the wisdom of all generations, and shared writing and speaking projects.

New insights into the future of faith and spirituality will come from collaborations in which the voices of both generations are heard equally. The wisdom and spirit that emerges from these dialogues will not only be a comfort and inspiration to older generations; it will help form and guide new generations seeking a substantive faith and deeper spiritual paths.

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