News



Young adult participants enjoy a break during the Call to Action national conference in San Antonio in November 2018. "It's really cool to be in a room with so many people who care about the church and want to see it continue to grow and thrive, but also want to see change," says Alyssa Duffner. (Deborah Winarski)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Editor's note: *This is part two of a three-part series on Call to Action, which has fought for reform in the church since the late 1970s and provided an important community for "Vatican II" Catholics during a rise of conservatism in the church hierarchy throughout the '80s and '90s.*

Our first story took a look at the challenges facing Call to Action, including an aging and declining membership and financial shortfalls. But a group of new, younger leaders are connecting with CTA through an innovative new program called Re/Generation, as our second story describes. These millennial Catholics may change the organization as they take over, however, and what such generational differences mean for the future of church reform will be explored in our last story in the series.

Morgan Bengel grew up in a conservative parish in a small town in Michigan and attended Aquinas College, where she was exposed to the more progressive Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, Michigan. She had just started formation as a candidate with the order when a friend suggested she apply for a new program sponsored by Call to Action.

"I didn't have a clue this organization existed," Bengel said of Call to Action, the 40-year-old church reform group that is based in Chicago. But after spending almost a year with the first cohort of what was then called the 20/30 Project for Mentoring and Leadership, the 24-year-old now believes "I wouldn't be Catholic if it weren't for them."

John Noble knew of Call to Action because his grandparents had been members, and the 24-year-old Nebraska native had been involved in previous iterations of CTA's young adult outreach. A graduate theology student at a mainline Protestant seminary, he considered ordination in that denomination but eventually realized he was "too Catholic."

He is a regular Mass-goer but admits he is a "church hopper" and not a member of a parish. He also bakes communion bread every other week for a small "church plant" Disciples of Christ/United Church of Christ community started by some friends. Such "dual belonging" is not contradictory for Noble.

Alyssa Duffner was energized by the connections between social justice and Catholicism she discovered while a student at the Jesuit St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. But during a year of post-graduate service through the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, she became disillusioned with the conservatism she saw in parishes in Montana, where she was stationed.

She is now part of the second round of CTA's program for young leaders — rebranded as "Re/Generation" — where she is once again bonding with other young Catholics for whom social justice and church reform are essential to their staying in the church.

"It's really cool to be in a room with so many people who care about the church and want to see it continue to grow and thrive, but also want to see change," said Duffner, who is 24.

The Re/Generation program is rather simple: it gathers a cohort of about a dozen young adults, awards them a stipend to pursue a project of their choosing, and matches them with an older mentor to guide them throughout the six-month program. Monthly videoconference calls with fellow "Re/Generators" cement relationships.

The participants defy much generalization, except that they are young, progressive and still consider themselves Catholic — although in ways that may look different than more traditionalist millennial Catholics or older Vatican II Catholics. They are not the "nones" that so many are worried about. Some from "Re/Gen" pray the rosary, attend Mass, belong to parishes, work for Catholic organizations and have attended Catholic colleges and universities. Catholicism is their birthright and part of their genetic makeup, they say.



Derek "Black Moses" Rankins Jr. presents his Re/Generation project during a group keynote address at the national Call to Action conference in November 2018. The young adults on the stage received a stipend to pursue a project of their choosing and were matched with an older mentor to guide them throughout the six-month program. (Deborah Winarski)

Yet they are struggling with their own vocational paths and wondering how they fit — or don't — in the institutional church. Many of them felt isolated, labeled as too "lefty" in Catholic circles and too religious in social justice ones.

Now they are connected to Call to Action, a church reform organization that — like many progressive Catholic organizations — has had difficulty attracting younger members and is facing financial challenges and declining membership.

CTA Executive Director Zach Johnson, himself a millennial, sees Re/Generation's goals as providing community and training leaders, even if those younger leaders change Call to Action as they make it their own.

"Regardless of how you want to approach church reform — protesting, talking to bishops, meetings — somebody has got to lead. We just didn't have those people," said Johnson, 30, who became CTA's executive director two years ago after several years of various interim leaders.

Answer to prayers

For the young "Re/Generators," the program has been "the answer to so many people's prayers," said Claire Hitchins, the 28-year-old CTA staff member who coordinates the program and who, like many of the participants, has struggled to find her place in a traditional parish.

"If you go to an institutional Catholic Church, the young people are so conservative," she said. "People like me have a sense that we're totally on our own on this. I'm Catholic — and I can't not be — but I can't find a place for myself in the pews."

Hitchins, a former Jesuit volunteer who has also lived among marginalized communities in Bolivia with the Maryknolls, belongs to an ecumenical community of young adults in Charlottesville.

She had previously attended a Call to Action national conference where she was happy to find similarly-minded fellow Catholics. "But at the same time, I also had this sense of uncertainty of where [the organization] was going to be in a couple of decades, since most folks were retirement age or older," she said.

Thanks to a grant from the Forum for Theological Exploration (an interfaith "leadership incubator") and resources from CTA, Hitchins and Johnson launched the program for young adults last spring.

> "I'm Catholic — and I can't not be — but I can't find a place for myself in the pews."
>
> — Claire Hitchins
>
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"The idea was to help foster a sense of community among Catholics who are pretty alienated and have experienced different forms of hurt and rejection by the institutional church, but yet whose whole orientation to life is still informed by the

Gospel and what is true and good, powerful and liberating in our Catholic faith," Hitchins said.

This is not CTA's first outreach to young adults. Although many of the previous programs have been successful in supporting young Catholics who might otherwise have left the church, there also was some intergenerational tension as some participants grew frustrated after being expected to be a spokesperson for their generation or to magically attract additional younger members.

The new Re/Generation program sees young Catholics as current leaders, not future ones, and demonstrates that commitment with the meaningful, albeit small, stipend. And the one-on-one mentoring creates intergenerational community, in which "wisdom can flow in two directions," Hitchins said.

At Call to Action's annual conference in San Antonio last November, the program's first cohort took the stage for an energetic Saturday evening keynote panel that included singing, cheering, some tears and lots of applause-like "snaps" as they introduced themselves and described their projects.

Breanna Mekuly, who works with the Erie Benedictines, facilitated small-group conversations about sexuality and spirituality as her project. The 29-year-old said she was happy "just knowing that there are other young people around the country who get it and can be my partners."

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Derek "Black Moses" Rankins Jr. — who lost his home to Hurricane Katrina — created a "Liberation Rosary" and prayer packet, designed from an Africana perspective. Racism is his primary issue, and he said he saw members of the CTA group as "not just friends, but family."

Twenty-four-year-old Abby Rampone, who grew up in a small town in Vermont, described how she never knew any "lefty Catholics" and "always thought I was alone," she said. Her project, a one-day conference for other young people held in March* at Union Theological Seminary in New York, became the first gathering for the dozen members of the second ReGeneration cohort.

Not the future, the now

At the national conference in Texas, the panel was asked, "What *don't* you want to be told again from older Catholics?" Topping the list: "You are the future of the church."

"We are not the future of the movement, we're the right now," Noble told NCR in a later interview. "We are core constituents in this movement. We're not an addendum or an add-on."

delfin bautista, 38, a member of the second cohort selected this winter, agrees that young Catholics are not waiting for torches to be passed to them: "The torches are in our hands right now."

This year's cohort was chosen from 35 applicants, up from 25 last year. They include graduate students, teachers, artists, writers, community organizers and campus ministers. One is a former Jesuit volunteer; another is exploring emergent models of community in the Nuns & Nones residency. According to their biographies, they care about social justice at home and abroad, spirituality, LGBTQ+ inclusion, women's ordination, reproductive justice, youth ministry and justice for survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

A Latinx transgender person whose project will adapt St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises for LGBTQ+ people, bautista appreciates how the program has included people from marginalized groups.

Ruby Fuentes, 27, is creating a podcast to amplify less-heard voices in the church, including people of color and LGBTQ+ Catholics. "I want to listen, to learn from somebody else's perspective and share it with everybody else," said Fuentes, who lives near the Texas-Mexico border.



delfin bautista (Courtesy of Call to Action)

Although active in her parish as a catechist, Fuentes had never heard of Call to Action until last year. "These people are definitely my tribe," she said. "After so many scandals and disappointments, [CTA] is a beacon of hope and gives me faith in our church."

Graduates from the firstyear of the program are already moving into leadership roles in Call to Action and elsewhere. One is helping to plan a regional CTA conference in Minneapolis in July; another is organizing a "People of Color" caucus in New Orleans next year. Bengel has put her pursuit of religious life on hold while she does a year or service. Others are working in environmental community organizing or as teachers at Catholic high schools.

If the Call to Action of the future has more of a "rag tag" feel, that's OK with some of its new, younger leaders. In response to a question during the panel presentation in San Antonio, about what they thought the future of the church would look like, the Re/Generators' answers revealed a comfort with lack of concrete plans and a trust in the Spirit.

Betsy Ericksen, 27, hoped it would look like the first 100 years of the church: "resisting empire and meeting in homes." Rampone thought it would be "messy," kind of like Catholic Worker houses. And Rankins saw it in racial terms: "Whiteness has a plan," he said. "But Jesus did not have a plan."

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf. She was a keynote speaker at the 2018 national Call to Action conference.]

**This date of the conference has been corrected.*

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