



# Reviews

**DEFIANT HOPE, ACTIVE LOVE: WHAT YOUNG ADULTS ARE SEEKING IN PLACES OF WORK, FAITH, AND COMMUNITY**, edited by Jeffrey Keuss, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2024. 170 pages. \$29.99.

Young adults are an under-represented population in many churches today. Amidst the hand-wringing taking place about this, many congregations are at a loss for what young adults are actually seeking in faith communities. Rather than take the risk of talking to young adults in their context, many churches proceed with business as usual and miss opportunities to open up their life and leadership to the dreams, struggles, gifts, and leadership of young adults. *Defiant Hope, Active Love* is a set of essays based on research conducted among young adults (defined as ages 23–29), primarily in the Pacific Northwest. Many of the researchers and contributors are themselves young adults, and their perspectives offer a fruitful picture. Contributors include Bob Drovdahl, Mackenzie Harris, Martín Jimenez, Mathea Kangas, Gabrielle Metzler, Linda Montaña and Lauren Pattie, alongside editor Jeffrey E. Keuss.

The Pivot NW research project upon which the book is based focused on the question: *How do emerging adult Christians perceive faithfulness?* Through a variety of listening and engagement methods, the researchers explored attitudes and behaviors of young adults around faith and community life. Emerging adults desire an authentic, holistic approach to faith in community and society yet often experience legacy church structures as disconnected from their ways of being, relating, and leading. Young adults are looking for genuine belonging and enhancement of well-being (which includes social transformation, finding purpose, personal transformation, and practices that build a sustainable faith).

Key themes that emerged in the research include the quest for authentic or genuine belonging, in which one can be vulnerable and “in process” rather than have everything fully worked out. Questions, doubts,

and an openness to diversity and change are critical elements of such an experience of community. Some young adults carry wounds from church harm that remain a significant barrier. At the same time, young adults do not want a fragile God and seek the kind of faithful wrestling and adventure that life in the Spirit involves. When faith communities reinforce certainty and safety as the baseline for faithfulness, they come into tension with this impulse.

Spiritual practices are central to the life of transformation, and emerging adults see these as essential elements of engagement and spiritual growth. The researchers found that mere institutional affiliation and participation are not sufficient amidst the yearning for deeper personal growth. Small groups can be one means of creating the kinds of hospitable communities for people to engage in vulnerability along this journey. Practicing justice and seeking social transformation are integral elements to a life of faith in the view of these young adults. The theme of community building figures prominently not only within a congregation but also in the wider neighborhood. Seeking the flourishing of all means engaging neighbors with cultural humility and intercultural competence.

The authors recognize that young adults are also typically in transition. Their stage of life means mobility and frequent change as they explore and settle into vocations and relationships. Effective young adult ministries recognize this and provide a “transition station”—a place to plug in and engage, even if it might mean for a shorter length of time. Many young adults yearn for intergenerational mentoring, though this can be complicated to put into practice.

One of the key themes of the book is leadership identification (a term preferred to “development,” which can connote control toward predetermined visions of what leadership should look like). Many legacy congregations struggle to welcome the leadership of young adults, expecting them to simply fit into existing boxes of organizational and community life rather than inviting their ownership and authority to help the congregation adapt to be better contextualized for young adults. Young adults often experience this as controlling rather than empowering.

*Defiant Hope, Active Love* offers a picture of a generation seeking transformational faith and belonging, ready to bring its gifts and voice to structures not always designed to receive them. The underlying research is limited by its bias toward the Pacific Northwest and does not have the generational comprehensiveness of major studies like the National Study of Youth and Religion. The book would have benefited from a more coherent and integrated framing, as the introduction and conclusion say

more about the editor's social agenda than the content of the research. Nonetheless, this volume brings some key insights to the table for faith communities looking to join with, engage, and receive the gifts of emerging adults.

Dwight Zscheile  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, MN