Whenever I reflect on the lectionary readings, I am drawn to the images of the youth particularly the youth of the church. There are other Bible stories about young people who were brought to health and to life. One of these is found in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus raised back to life a little girl saying “Talitha cumi” which means “Little girl, I say to you arise” (Mark 5:41).

Notice some of the similarities in the narratives:
- Both mothers were widows who had only a son.
- Death of their young sons and being raise back to life
- Sons were given back to the mothers alive.
- Acknowledgement of Elijah and Jesus as God’s prophets and God sent.

In those days, for a widow to lose a son, especially one’s only child, is a very painful and tragic experience. The suffering continues because she feel incomplete and her future, hopeless. Nobody, not a husband, a son, or a daughter is there to take care of her in old age. The poor widow and her son who fed Elijah their supposed last meal, were sure to die in extreme poverty as drought is brought upon by the Lord against Ahab, king of Israel, for he “did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.” (1 Kings 16:25 & 30). Ahab worshipped Baal.

With an idolatrous and evil king, the widow can only look up to God for help. And God’s comfort and sustenance came through the prophet Elijah. Our call to worship echoes this assurance: “The Lord watches over the stranger in the land; he upholds the orphan and widow; (Psalm 46:9)

In several Uniting Church congregations I have visited and spoken to, and in many class discussions at the Center of Theology and Ministry, the topic about “dying churches” or “dying congregations” has become a very passionate conversation. For many of us who come from Asia, this theme is alien to us. It is “dying churches” or “dying congregations” has become a very passionate conversation. For many of us who come from Asia, this theme is alien to us. It is simply unthinkable for Christ’s churches to die. Yet on this side of the globe there seems to be truth in this. We have graying, thinning and dissipating congregations and there are no second and third generations of members to carry on. And who are these? They are the youth.

A Research made by the Christian Research Association (CRA). Its findings were published in a book Australia’s Religious Communities: Facts and Figures from the 2011 Australian Census and other Sources. Its conclusion carries both good news and bad: Religion in Australia is not disappearing. Overall, the numbers identifying with a religious group are continuing to grow. The numbers identifying with a Christian denomination have grown from 12.8 to 13.1 million between 2001 to 2011. Migration has had a considerable impact on that growth. However, almost all religious groups are losing more than they are gaining. Most are not keeping the children born into them. (p. 9)

In 2011, the Uniting Church had comparatively few younger people as shown in its age profile. Fifty per cent of all those who identified with Uniting Church were aged 50 years or older. According to the International Social Survey Program, of all those who attended monthly or more often 57 per cent were aged 60 or older, and 60 per cent were women. (p. 103-4)

In another research, the CRA estimates that 50,000 young people a year are leaving the Christian faith and deciding that they have “no religion”. The research noted that there is an occurring movement into “no religion”. It says, “it is not a rejection of all religious beliefs but rather people are ceasing to identify with specific religious organizations...The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes shows that the levels of confidence in religious organizations is low and that is a major factor in people not identifying.” (p. 9)

The research did not explore the reasons why the shift is occurring. Perhaps it is something for our church to explore. Rightfully, the prevailing culture, being populist, individualistic, liberal and commercial is blamed as the culprit. It is to this dominant culture where the church is waged to “compete” against. As it stands, the church seems to be losing.

Has the principle of church and state separation got to do something about this? Michael Bird, a New Testament lecturer at Crossway College, Brisbane and Fellow of the Center for Public Christianity says: “[S]eparation of church and state is a good thing. It protects the state from being a theocracy, and it protects the church from government interference. However, separation of church and state does not mean the church and state cannot cooperate for the greater good of society.”

There were sectors of society who opposed the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) using the church and state separation principle. Bird defended school chaplaincy by saying “The real issue is that some of the more ardently godless simply do not want kids or teenagers to have a positive experience of religion or religious people...Because in a place like a public school, where young people can get to know them and...even start to like them, young people might begin to find their way of life so attractive and their world view coherent, that they might even aspire to be like them.”

What I observe in Australia is the trend to secularize society. There is a conscious but subtle move to push religion out to make society religion-free. It is not about freedom of religion but rather freedom from religion. Who benefits from a religion–free society? What sort of society would ensue when the values for which Christianity stands for, so with other Living Faiths, like love, justice, freedom, abundant life, respect for human rights and genuine peace, are negated? The unjust, the greedy, and the powerful few would stand to gain in such society.
But shouldn’t we also be looking at internal factors? What is within the church that pushes the young people away if not out? Often we hear about how worship services are conducted (Are they children and youth-friendly?). How intentional is our discipleship education for the young? (And what does discipleship education contains and entails?).

When I was a child, after Sunday school we would gather into the worship hall of the church. Sitting with our parents, we are taught to sit still in silence and listen, observe, and try to understand what’s going on. We follow the congregation in singing (even old traditional hymns) and recite (creeds and our statement of faith). There are many things we did not understand but it did not deter us to worship of God. As a child, I learned that to worship is to behave in God’s presence, learn the hymns and psalms so I can praise God, listen to what is preached in the sermon especially those I can put my young mind around. I never entertained boredom in the church. Church was never a waste of time. I learned discipline, discipleship, and dedication.

I learned to love and serve the church despite its mistakes and imperfections. Never have I thought of giving up with my church or leaving the church. Why? Because I believe there is goodness in the church. As long as it remains faithful to its Lord, it will remain to be an instrument of good and for social change.

But what do we teach our children and youth about the church nowadays? For some parents, why is it acceptable to impose on children what footy team to barrack for than to oblige them to attend church? I think everything boils down to the question of how much meaning and relevance do we place to the church.

Why are the children segregated, sent out during worship, when as members of the church they should be participants in the collective life and work of the church especially on Sunday worship? Why shouldn’t all worship be all-age? Are youth, children and babies incapable of worshipping together with their adult counterparts? Or do we consider them distraction to solemn, adults-only worship?

We need to bring back the young people in the church. We need to raise them back to health and to life. We must set the example to be firm in our faith and in declaring that the church is here for the life of the world - that the church, as a people of God, remains to be relevant and powerful in the transformation of society and the world.

After raising the widow’s son back to life, Elijah would soon set a battle to fight the false prophets of Baal whom Israelite King Ahab worshipped. Ahab was married to Sidonian princess Jezebel, who was ‘killing off the prophets of the Lord’ (1 King 18.4). In the duel, the Baal’s prophets were annihilated. Later on in the story, at the edge of being destroyed by the Lord, Ahab was humbled and so disaster did not fell on him (1 Kings 21.27). Israel was restored to the Lord for several years.

In the season of Pentecost, let us be stirred up and provoked by the prophesies spoken through prophet Joel and echoed by Peter before the people saying: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Acts 2.17-21)

We need our sons and daughters to prophesy and our young people to see visions. Have faith in God they will. And they can be capable only if we lead them rightfully in the way of the Lord. But let me ask you, the old men and women of the church, have you already stopped dreaming dreams? Have you stopped dreaming that there is still much a better world to be built and established? Do you feel comfortable already and you don’t want to mess around anymore thinking that the world will be taken cared of by politicians and the few rich and powerful rather than by our prophesying sons and daughters and visionary young people of the church?

Roy Costner IV, a high school valedictorian from South Carolina ripped up his approved speech for their graduation when he addressed the attendees at Liberty High School. Minutes later, he delivered the Lord’s Prayer in defiance of the school district’s decision to exclude prayer at graduation ceremonies. May I invite you to watch this 51-second video about the courage of a young man who wanted to be true to himself, to the world, and to God. (Video)

Amen.

Notes:
1. E-mailed Newsletter from Christian research Association from Phillip Hughes, Friday June 7, 2013.