This past week Lake Institute on Faith & Giving began 2016 focused on a new – and younger audience. Partnering with the Academy of Preachers, Lake Institute offered a workshop entitled “Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity across the Generations.” While some demographics bemoan the “rise of the nones” highest among the millennial generation, the annual Festival of Young Preachers offered by the Academy of Preachers bucks such a trend. Held in Lexington, Kentucky, this January, the annual three-day conference brings together young preachers and their mentors from every domination imaginable to work on their craft and to learn from seasoned religious leaders from around the country. Initiated in 2009 with a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., The Academy of Preachers is an ecumenical organization working with more than 1,000 young people ages 14-28 from across the nation and seeks to identify, network, support and inspire young people in their vocation to preach.

Lake Institute was delighted to engage young preachers as well as seasoned pastors and religious leaders to equip them with the tools necessary to navigate the shifting landscape of religious leadership and generational change. Led by PhD student, Rev. Thad Austin and MA student Rev. Winterbourne Harrison-Jones, the workshop outlined three steps which congregational leaders must take as they engage in the work of cultivating congregational cultures of generosity in their respective contexts across the generations. We feel they are worth sharing here as well:

1st Congregations must find ways in which to create intergenerational opportunities to give and serve together. The key word here is – together. Our research demonstrates that parents and grandparents continue to be the most significant voices in shaping giving among the next generation.¹ We may have grown up watching our parents put something in the offering plates, but we often did not hear from them why they gave. As online giving grows, often many of even our most dedicated donors no longer put something in the basket as it passes. Are there ways to promote giving and serving together or equipping families with tools to “have a conversation” about giving?

2nd Congregations must find ways to pair religious giving opportunities with leadership development. While many youth and young adults may not be able to give at the levels as more established parishioners, they can however offer their time and talents as meaningful contributions to congregational life. Long-time Vice-President at the Lilly Endowment, Dr. Craig Dykstra often refers to these interchanges as the root of “sustained conversations.” True to Dr. Dykstra’s words, what emerges from these conversations and time together in sharing and value-making, is a “more vital community of faith” that is both accessible and malleable for everyone.
Congregations must be willing to address issues of material possessions and money matters that confront parishioners at every turn in their daily lives. Too often, topics of money are taboo in the church unless we are trying to raise the budget. Jesus never shied away from confronting the power that money and the influence that material possessions can have over us; neither should the church. If living generously is a part of our faith formation, then we must help those entrusted to our care engage these pressing issues in our culture.

One attendee of Lake Institute’s session at the Academy of Young Preachers, Minister Keira Dandridge, a 28-year-old student at the Interdenominational Theological Center and congregational leader from Atlanta Georgia commented: “I've attended too many seminars, church business meetings, and classes on financial literacy to count. All I can say is wow! Never have I heard money given back its power to liberate and transform the mind of churchgoers through teaching on a theology of stewardship.”

Dr. Dwight Moody, Director of the Academy of Preachers, and an alumnus of the ECRF program, shared Keira’s enthusiasm: “As Lake Institute continues to expand its programming and partnerships, hopefully more young ministers like Keira will be introduced to the transformative work of the Lake Institute.”

In 2016, Lake Institute is working toward a number of initiatives to encourage conversations on faith and giving across the generations and explore new strategies to engage millennials. Stay tuned for updates on this work, and please let us know what you have found helpful in your own contexts. Email us at lfi@iupui.edu or tweet us @LakeInstitute.