

## Are churches graceless and unloving?

Written by Calvin Fox

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The new Director of the Peace Corps was interviewed recently on a TV talk show. The organization itself has been criticized in the past, but the Director is an impassioned advocate of the work that Peace Corps workers are doing today. He gave examples of very worthwhile and projects being done around the world by predominately white, college educated, privileged and idealistic American young adults. More than 165,000 have been involved. In the United States, many of their counterparts are working in AmeriCorps. That is a network of more than 3,000 non-profit organizations, public agencies, and faith-based organizations. More than 70,000 individuals join AmeriCorps each year. There have been more than 400,000 members since 1994.

These workers are doing things that Christian young people are severely criticizing evangelical churches for not doing. Evangelical Colleges have responded to this criticism. It seems like most ads promoting them feature their students and graduates doing this kind of work, too. And many churches are responding by promoting sort term missions trips in which the people who go do Peace Corps kind of projects.

A week does not go by without my hearing from young adults explaining why they have no use for most churches. It is always the same complaint: as they see it, churches are irrelevant to today's world. They do not engage in community activism and promote social and economic justice, particularly among Poor and marginalized people. As corollary to that, these predominately white, (liberal) college educated, privileged and idealistic young adults fault evangelical churches for being legalistic and judgemental and thus unloving and devoid of grace, which makes these churches hypocritical, because they are not open, welcoming and affirming of all kinds of people, including overt homosexuals, addicts, the homeless and the mentally ill.

Many of these youthful critics go on to seriously question the kind of God that typical churches worship. Such churches, they reason, must believe in a God who is also devoid of grace and love. He must be like the people who attend the churches and they find nothing attractive at all about Him. If anything, they may admire Jesus, who, they figure, is like them. Probably most of the young adults involved in the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps are not evangelical Christians and the work is "secular", but those who are Christians sincerely believe that what they are doing is exactly what Jesus would be doing himself. In their mind, they are being disciples of Jesus and living out the Gospel of the Kingdom like He did. Are they? This emergent generation must be taken seriously. Are their criticisms valid? How can we answer them? Are they living out the Gospel? Are traditional, conservative, evangelical churches legalistic, i.e.- graceless and unloving?

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