



**YOUNG**

**A GROWING YOUNG GUIDE**

**ADULT**

**MINISTRY**

**STEVEN ARGUE**

**NOW**



**Fuller Youth Institute**

# **YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW**

## **A GROWING YOUNG GUIDE**

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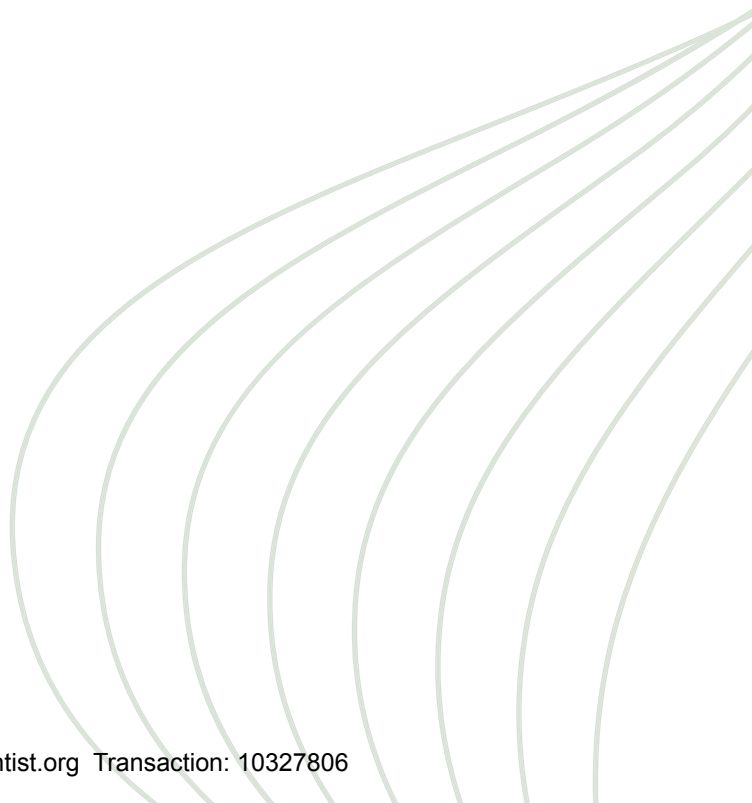
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**To young adult ministry leaders—  
your care reaches past your job descriptions,  
your love flows beyond your daily schedules,  
your effort transcends your comfort zones, and  
your ministry embodies good news now.**

**You see young adults.  
And we see you.**



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book stands on the shoulders of my smart and passionate colleagues at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) who, together, are committed to equipping diverse leaders and parents so faithful young people can change our world. Kara Powell served as a brilliant co-investigator and collaborator on our Ministry Innovation with Young Adults (MIYA) research. Caleb Roose has been my close partner throughout the MIYA project, bringing his mad organizational skills, pastoral instinct, and shared passion for young adults. Zach Ellis and Jane Hong-Guzmán de León played essential roles in conceptualizing and assessing our project while also serving church leaders with wisdom and care. Rachel Dodd has been my editorial conversation partner who makes grammar an art form and reads with pastoral insight. Brad Griffin, our senior director of content, has been a cheerleader for this book right from the beginning. Macy Davis and John Kwok have brought the text to life, making this book something you read and experience. Teesha Hadra, Justin Fung, Katie Sanders, and Scott Cormode served as coaches and conversation partners throughout the project, supporting ministry leaders in ways they still talk about.

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Thank you to all of the participating churches who invested their time and took risks to attempt something new together. (See [Appendix 3](#) for a full list.) Your investment with young adults helped us all learn together and will impact and inspire many congregations for years to come.

Finally, we need young adult ministry now because young adults have always mattered. I'm particularly grateful for the young adults who have taken chances to work closely with their churches to sacrificially invest in our cohorts and vulnerably share their perspectives. Thank you for your presence, insights, grace, patience, and hope that have shaped us and changed us. We need you. We really do.

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# INTRODUCTION

## YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

We need young adult ministry now.

*We need young adult ministry now—because young adults need us now*

They're searching for support from trusted leaders, but don't have the luxury to wait until faith communities get their acts together by figuring out who young adults<sup>1</sup> are, what they care about, or what they need.

Their lives are moving fast, so they need us to catch up and to show up.

*And we need young adult ministry now—because we need young adults now*

We need their passions, gifts, perspectives, and yes, even their critiques.

And you, reader, need young adult ministry now—because you've been charged or compelled to "do something" for young adults in your context.

You may feel the pressure to act because you already know young adults well.

You see their search and desire for good news as they negotiate one of the most defining decades of their lives.

And for their sake, you can't wait.

You need,  
they need,  
we need,  
young adult ministry *now*.  
So let's not wait.

### ***You're probably reading this because you care about young adults***

In the conversations we have at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) with ministry leaders—youth leaders, senior pastors, family ministers, and volunteers—most admit that they see the disconnect between their faith communities and the young adults they care about, yet struggle with what to do about it.

After all, these young adults aren't complete strangers.

They're the once-teenagers you invested in through your youth ministry programming.

They're the young people who chose to stay local rather than leave town for college.

The ones who jumped right into the workforce and are trying to make their way.

The transplants who show up with overwhelming schedules, yet few relationships.

Their place in life is diverse and changing.

They're in-between jobs and want to make a difference.

Newly married and happily single.

Post-military and post-grad school.

Corporate fast-trackers and entrepreneurial start-uppers.

Broken-hearted, yet hopeful.

Far from home while also trying to feel at home right where they are.



Church-suspicious, but spiritually interested.

You know them.

You love them.

You intermittently hear from them as your paths cross in-person and online. Probably, because you care, they reach out to you for advice, for support, for coffee, for connection.

That connection is real to you.

And it's often a lifeline for them.

***Because you care, perhaps your church is hoping you'll crack the code on young adult ministry***

But the task feels overwhelming.

After all, there's just one you—and you have limited time and resources to give young adults the care they need and want.

Your time is divided.

Their lives are in motion.

And your church wants someone—someone like you—to do something because there is “concern” (okay, worry)

(honestly, panic)

that young adults and churches are finding little connection.

Everyone feels the disconnect—and then you show up. You're the one who cares, who has some affinity with young adults, and even has the courage to step into this confusing gap with little support and few resources. Your church gets excited. But you may (often) feel like you're in over your head. That's not surprising—keep reading!

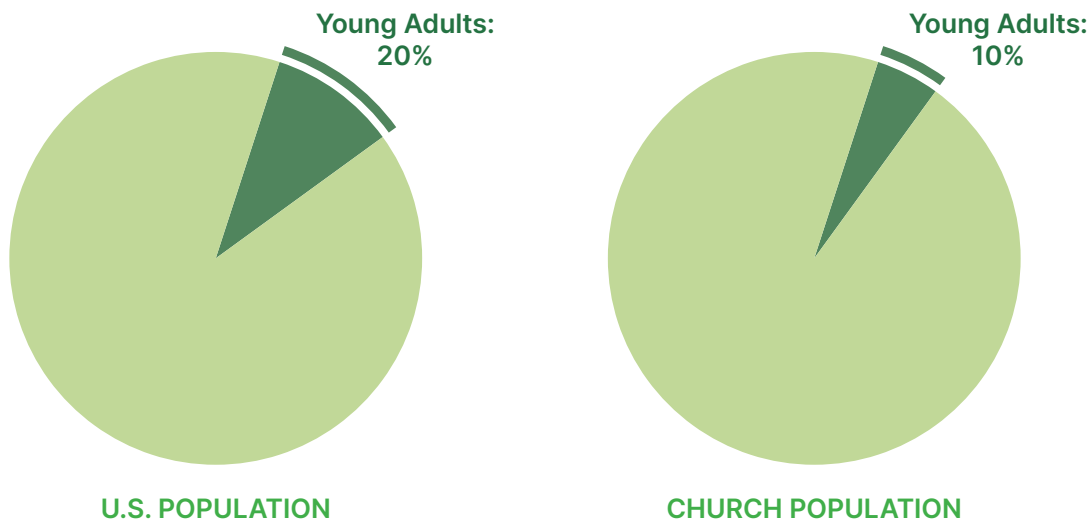
## WHAT ARE YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY LEADERS LIKE YOU SAYING?

Our research team at FYI set out to learn more about those leaders who serve young adults by surveying 100 of you. We followed up by conducting focus groups to listen deeply and learn more about your experiences. We discovered that without a doubt, you are all remarkable people who are doing your best to work with what you have. And no matter your church size, you share some common experiences and impressions:

### *Young adults take up little church space*

Ministry leaders we surveyed reported that 10% of their church congregations are made up of young adults. Most churches said that they had less than 50 attending. (Note that 20-35-year-olds make up 20% of the United States population.<sup>2</sup>) For most parishioners, young adults remain unseen and rarely understood. This can make it hard to convince your church to prioritize them.

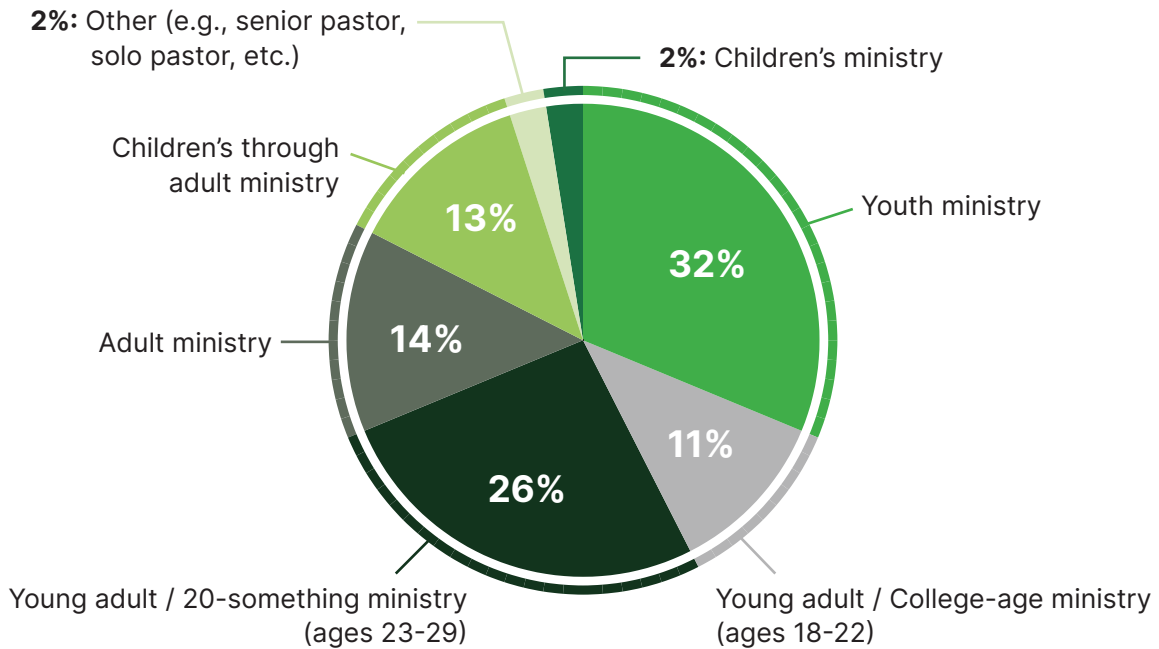
#### YOUNG ADULTS AS A PERCENTAGE OF OVERALL POPULATION



### *Young adult ministry leaders can't invest much time in young adults...*

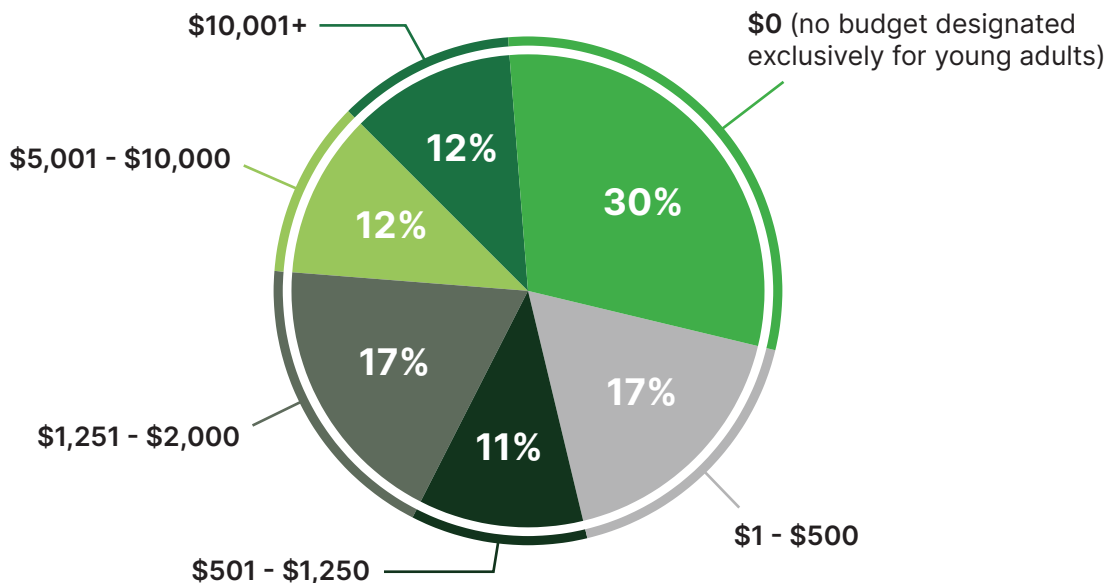
Of the leaders who said they worked with young adults, only 37% reported that their actual job titles focused primarily on that group (e.g., young adult or college-age ministry). The other 63% who worked with young adults held different primary roles with multiple responsibilities (e.g., children's, youth, or adult ministries). Further, those attempting young adult ministry revealed that, on average, young adult ministry leaders spend eight hours per week on young adult-related ministry. Only 10% of leaders reported dedicating 20 or more weekly hours to young adult ministry. So, leaders like you want to be committed to your young adults, but you're already spread thin with little time and lots of competing responsibilities.

#### **PRIMARY CHURCH ROLE RESPONSIBILITIES AMONG THOSE WHO SERVE YOUNG ADULTS**



**...and don't have much of a budget...**

For the majority of churches in our survey, the median annual budget for young adult ministry was between \$501-\$1,250. Let's be blunt—that's *barely* a budget.



**...and feel under-resourced.**

33% of you reported that when it comes to resources for ministering to young adults, you either create your own or don't use any. Some leaders have access to denominational ministry tools, while most simply search on their own for podcasts, videos, or books that may help. Most of you said you wish you had more resources that you could use now.

## **YET, YOU'RE HERE**

Resourced or not, you're working with what you have to make a difference.

### ***Some of you are youth leaders***

You see a gap between youth ministry and adult-oriented programs with little church vision or support for those in between. You're trying to close the gap out of love and commitment for the young adults you've known since their teenage years. They need a familiar guide for those first years out of high school, and you're it. This extension of your ministry may not be in your job description. Your church loves that you take on the added responsibilities, but rarely supports you with extra pay or budget. You're doing the best you can while relying on your intuition, improvisation, and relational investment.

### ***Some of you are young adult ministry leaders***

Your church charges you to focus on “younger” young adults—those 18-25 years old who are navigating their major post-high school transitions surrounding relationships, community, vocation, and spirituality. You're trying to show your church that young adults are still connected even if they aren't present all the time due to their packed schedules or out-of-town commitments. You sense that even though young adults don't always show up to church functions, they desire relationships and spaces to work through their hopes and challenges. You are the ones who see and stand up for young adults when the rest of the church forgets about them. Out of sight, out of mind.

### ***Some of you are associate, next-gen, or family pastor-types***

You see the young adult gap in your churches, yet you also don't have much time or resources to support them. You try to connect one-on-one or get volunteers to mentor them, but frequently your mentors misunderstand the unique challenges facing this generation and do more harm than good. You see young adults as ages

18 to mid-30s—a giant and vague space where age isn't a universal indicator of where they're at or what they need. You're aware that your church is better tailored for married couples and families, which makes young adults—who are delaying marriage and families—feel unseen and unwelcome.

### ***Some of you are volunteers***

You're not on the church payroll, but you care about young adults and do what you can to be there for them. Perhaps you're a mentor, friend, parent, grandparent, or caring adult who feels compelled to acknowledge them, connect with them, or support them. You see the gap, you just can't wait for the church to make young adults a priority, so you've jumped in.

### ***Some of you are young adults yourselves***

You're not only reading this book as a young adult ministry leader, but you're also someone who is in or close to young adulthood. (At FYI, we define this as 18-29 years old.) Some of you even admitted to us that you started a young adult ministry so that you might have community in an otherwise relationally isolating context. When you think of young adult ministry, you think "we" more than "them."

### ***Here's the hopeful news: you're in good company***

The snapshots above tell a story we've heard from many young adult ministry leaders like you—people who are showing up, reaching out, trying to do something ... now.

Take heart.

We see you.

We know your time is divided.

We suspect your budget is limited.

We believe in your care for young adults.

We're convinced your church wants to support young adults.

And we're willing to bet that young adults are searching for caring people and communities just like you.

## **YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY RESEARCH + GROWING YOUNG = YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW**

This book is designed to give your ministry traction based on what we've learned through FYI's five-year research project on young adults and congregations.

Over the past half decade, we've worked with 80 ministry leaders and 80 young adults from 40 small to large churches representing over 15 denominations, seeking to learn how congregations can minister with and to young adults. We wanted to discover what young adults say they need from church the most. Our findings have sharpened this vision.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, through our *Growing Young* research and training, we've worked with hundreds of congregations, helping them assess and discover the six commitments churches need to create environments best suited for young people to thrive spiritually. These include prioritizing young people, being the best neighbors, unlocking keychain leadership, empathizing with this generation, taking Jesus' message seriously, and fueling warm relationships.<sup>4</sup>

Our research, training, convening, surveying, and listening have helped us clarify what young adults need and what young adult ministry can do. We're excited to share our insights to support your work.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 1 offers perspectives to help understand and communicate who young adults are and what they're experiencing in their defining third decade of life.

Chapter 2 takes a deeper dive into the spiritual and religious lives of young adults. We'll introduce you to some key findings drawn from our work with congregations

throughout the country, highlighting six core commitments Growing Young churches possess that create the best environments for young people, including young adults, to spiritually flourish.

Chapter 3 introduces and draws from FYI's research project, *Ministry Innovations with Young Adults*. We'll explore why compassion is crucial for young adult ministry and unpack Growing Young commitments around empathy and neighboring, providing practical steps you can take right away.

Chapter 4 spotlights young adult ministry's need for focused creativity. Growing Young core commitments to take Jesus' message seriously and ensure relational warmth provide reliable focal points to direct your creativity, connect with young adults, and nurture unity. You'll receive some helpful tools to start creatively supporting young adults where they say they need you most.

Chapter 5 inspires you to courageously try your young adult ministry ideas without being afraid. Leaders and communities of courage rely on Growing Young commitments about prioritizing young adults everywhere and exercising keychain leadership to make this possible. These practical approaches will not only support young adults, but can also transform your whole congregation.

Chapter 6 focuses particularly on the young adult ministry leader. While faith communities need reliable information, commitments, and strategies, they also need you. This chapter calls young adult ministry leaders to make four shifts that will help you advocate for young adults and, quite honestly, save your soul.

We need young adult ministry now.

Believe it because of the love you have for young adults.

Embrace it with the hope that there are faithful ways forward.

Activate it with confidence that God has called you to advocate for young adults in your corner of the world.

May this book be one way of saying that we're with you.

Let's go.



# CHAPTER 01

## THE REAL PATH(S) OF TODAY'S YOUNG ADULTS

At FYI training seminars, we share two slides so compelling that, without fail, phones are pulled out to capture and share.

This first slide depicts the markers a growing-up person reaches along their way to adulthood—attending high school, then college (for some), then a job, next marriage, and having kids. It's a familiar trajectory for older and middle-class generations—a common storyline. This set of assumptions represents what parents, extended families, communities, and churches currently work toward and even pray for.

### SLIDE 1: THE OFTEN-EXPECTED PATH OF YOUNG ADULTS

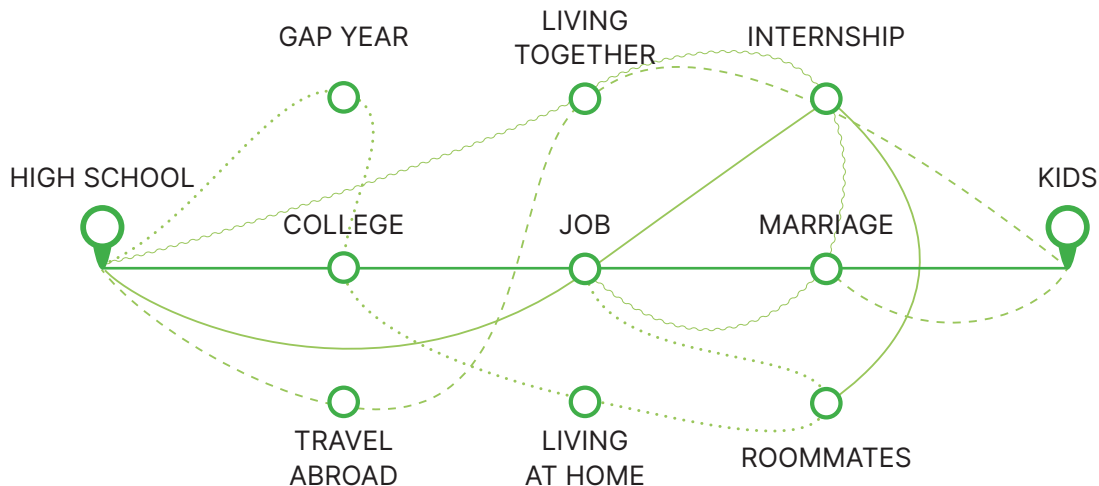


This path has been so ingrained as the “American Dream” that most American churches design their ministry structures to mirror this progression. It’s the way of success—or even faithfulness—and there’s a subtle message conveyed that something’s wrong with young adults who diverge from this script. Those who take a different path are often pitied or treated as suspect.

If you think I’m being dramatic, just ask a person in their twenties how often they get asked about when they’ll grow up, settle down, get married, and start a family.

This “Slide 1” expectation blinds congregations from seeing young adults for who they are, where they are, and what they’re searching for. That’s why we show the second graphic that describes the not-so-linear reality of young adults’ lives today.

### SLIDE 2: THE REAL PATH OF YOUNG ADULTS



This second slide offers a different and more accurate depiction of young adults’ journeys through their third decade of life.

Here, phones rise again—this time with gasps and chuckles. The previous linear path is buried by a dozen other possible trajectories and combinations young adults might take as they negotiate their lives from high school toward adulthood. Paths diverge with gap years, elongated college, multiple jobs, living together, delayed marriage, and later childbearing years.

The point of these graphics isn’t to judge one slide as better than the other. Instead, these slides recognize that the once-linear path assumed and supported in society no longer captures the varied trajectories for most young people today. Young adults face more choices, challenges, and opportunities on their road to adulthood—and all of this requires more time and new forms of support.

There's a lot more we could say about these shifts. In fact, I teach a whole course on emerging and young adults at Fuller Theological Seminary. While I'll offer a big-picture view here, I hope these snapshots can help you better understand young adults and even share these quick snapshots with those in your community who are still looking at (and evaluating) young adults with a "Slide 1" view.

## EXPECTATION VS. REALITY

If your church wants a vibrant, growing young adult community who feels they're a connected and integral part of the congregation, challenging some of the world's common assumptions is a vital first step.

*For those of you who find data helpful, enjoy this next section. If you're the type who prefers to get to the action points, look for the "talking point" statements to give you conversation starters you can use with your church right now. The following brief snapshots are not meant to be exhaustive, nor do they comprehensively unpack important gender, ethnic, and racial realities, but they do highlight the current climates most young adults experience and navigate.*

Throughout this book, we refer to people ages 18-29 as *young adults* because ministry leaders tell us that this is the most common term they use. In academic circles, this time period is actually referred to as *emerging adulthood*. Emerging adulthood is a growing area of study that acknowledges young or emerging adults aren't merely "going through a phase," "being irresponsible with their lives," or "avoiding growing up." Rather, they're entering a recognized period in human

development where they have more capacity to reflect on who they are, focus more on investing in who they want to become, and navigate more choices on the road to adulthood—a target that has become more vague and less supported.

These 18–29-year-olds emerging into adults neither identify as adolescents nor believe that they have attained adulthood yet. This is why well-respected research confirms that many feel in-between, put extra energy into focusing on their own lives, and feel optimistic about their futures while also being overwhelmed by the amount they must do to prepare for adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

Do adults in your church community struggle to empathize with young adults you know? In this chapter, as we unpack some unique attributes about young adulthood now, I'll give you talking points you can use to spark better conversations within your church.

**TO START OFF, TRY THIS:** *Young adulthood isn't a choice to delay or avoid adulthood. It's a period in life where emerging adults face new social and economic challenges that make their path to adulthood longer and more challenging. To make it through, they need our support more than our critique.*

## Gap years

More young people are taking time off to do something different before enlisting in the military, joining the workforce, or attending college. They feel they need more time to figure out who they are and what they want to do. It's becoming a more accepted and less expensive alternative than going to college to “find yourself.” According to Foundry 10, who surveyed young people in the state of Washington,

20% of students took a gap year in 2020-2021, compared to 3% in 2018. Likely, the pandemic impacted that increase. But the trend was growing pre-pandemic: an earlier study noted that over half of high school students were considering delaying college or taking a gap year.<sup>7</sup>

Those entering young adulthood are having to make educational pivots often impacted by financial decisions, especially affecting those from lower income households.<sup>8</sup> While young adults take gap years for multiple reasons, it's evident that the linear path from high school to college is less automatic and gap years provide a viable, even necessary, option.

**TALKING POINT:** *Gap years aren't about delaying adulthood. They're alternative ways that young adults learn and grow when college is too expensive and job options are too limited.*

### ***Average length of college***

Among high school graduates ages 16-24, 62% were enrolled in college in 2020.<sup>9</sup> Of those who enroll in a four-year institution, only about half graduate in four years and two-thirds finish in six years. In fact, what colleges now call "150% of normal time" signals that these institutions recognize it's taking longer for students to graduate.<sup>10</sup> Even the terminology of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior is less helpful because it rarely corresponds with a student's "year" in school.

Contributing to the extended college journey are the rising costs of college itself. The average cost of college in the U.S. (currently \$35,720 per student per year) has tripled over 20 years.<sup>11</sup> As such, more students must work or accrue debt to pay for this life investment. The once-linear path has many potholes, dead ends, and detours for young adults today.

**TALKING POINT:** *Rising college costs require students to work more and extend their college graduation timeline. We must acknowledge that the profile of the “typical” college student is changing.*

### ***Multiple and unequal jobs***

The job market has become less stable, with few companies making long-term commitments to employees. Graduates must learn to be free agents, cobbling together jobs to make full-time work or be ready for frequent downsizing and outsourcing of their positions. A typical young adult will hold 8.2 jobs between ages 18-33.<sup>12</sup> In 2021, 80% of job losses occurred among those ages 35 and under. As one of my graduate students mused, “Instead of working a 9-to-5 job, we’re working 5-to-9 jobs.” And still today, young adult women make only 82 cents for every \$1 that young adult men make.<sup>13</sup>

One way young adults have responded is by starting their own businesses. New start-up businesses jumped 24% in 2021 (a record high<sup>14</sup>) and in 2019 almost 40% of new businesses were started by those under age 35.<sup>15</sup> Lack of stable jobs means young adults live in a vocational mix of unstable careers, innovative work, creative start-ups, and much more vulnerable lives.

---

***Instead of working a 9-to-5 job,  
we’re working 5-to-9 jobs.***

---

**TALKING POINT:** *Young adults have been the most hurt by a volatile economy impacting how they spend, save, and invest in their futures. A full-time job with benefits isn't a guarantee. Young adults often dread the question, "What do you do?" but may be more open to, "What are you working toward these days?"*

### **Financial goals and woes**

Young adults see financial independence as a sign of becoming an adult and they're struggling to achieve this goal. The average student loan debt for a young adult is \$37,584. That means they'll pay close to \$2,000 in loan interest each year for over 20 years.<sup>16</sup> This debt is one reason most young adults cannot purchase homes: as of 2021, less than 40% of those under age 35 are homeowners.<sup>17</sup> One study revealed that only about 20% of young adults were deemed financially stable.<sup>18</sup> Taken together, debt, rising costs of living, low credit scores, lack of financial knowledge, and unpredictable job markets have a significant impact on young adults' financial behaviors and goals.

**TALKING POINT:** *Debt is one of the largest expenses young adults carry. Financial stability is a goal that will take time to achieve. Often young adults who move back home are not committing an "adulting fail," but are taking deliberate, adulting steps to actually gain financial stability.*

## ***Delayed marriage and parenthood***

Young adults often treat marriage with great caution. Circumstances such as their own parents divorcing or the decoupling of sex and marriage in society create less expectation to marry early or at all. Young adults also feel pressure to become financially secure and professionally established before entering into the commitments of marriage and parenthood. As a result, their more cautious approaches to decisions around marriage and family require us to offer more understanding and patience.

**TALKING POINT:** *Many young adults desire to marry, but some are also choosing to remain single. One choice is not necessarily better than another. Try acknowledging their relational choices rather than judging or feeling sorry for them.*

## ***Mental health***

Studies reveal that in 2020 the highest rates of mental illness were reported by young adults aged 18-25, followed by those aged 26-49. Among young adults, over 40% reported mental illness in the past year and 11% had thoughts of suicide.<sup>19</sup> Current statistics reveal that mental illness is a topic that needs awareness and dialogue for all generations, but especially among our young people.<sup>20</sup>



**TALKING POINT:** *Awareness of and the ability to talk about mental health is essential for young adults today. Let's acknowledge that we're all holding a lot these days.*

### **Racial diversity**

The 2020 United States Census reveals a significantly growing population diversity. One diversity milestone is that more than 40% of Americans identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color (BIPOC) and it's projected that this demographic will be the majority population by 2045.<sup>21</sup> The young adult population will reach this tipping point by 2027.<sup>22</sup>

For young adults, racial justice isn't mere theory—it's rooted in the world they live in and the relationships they value. It's likely that these factors fuel their commitment to racial equity and concern over racial inequality. Gallup reported that more than 70% of young adults felt connected to protests against racial injustice, with one in four participating in demonstrations.<sup>23</sup>

**TALKING POINT:** *Our population is growing in diversity and young adults have a growing interest in racial justice and activism for racial equity. When young adults talk about diversity, they're thinking about their friends, not just an issue.*

## Optimism

In spite of the challenges facing today's young adults, research indicates that many remain optimistic that their lives will be better—and that even the mistakes they have made are lessons to make them stronger.<sup>24</sup> Young adults are motivated, yet let's not assume that they'll "turn out alright in the end" without considering their challenges. Being aware of what's going on in their lives when they're not involved in church may help us appreciate their journeys and offer the support they need to make it in this world.

**TALKING POINT:** *Even through life's challenges, young adults remain optimistic and hopeful. And they still want and need the support of understanding faith communities.*

These snapshots remind older adults that the decisions of young adults aren't just about personal choice, quality of character, or work ethic. They're responding to the unique social, economic, and cultural world they've inherited. The world has changed and today's young adults are learning to change with it. We cannot treat them with "Slide 1" assumptions when they are navigating "Slide 2" realities.

And, perhaps, that's the point: we have to start talking *about* and *with* young adults to really see them in order to truly support them. Let's start understanding young adults' perspectives now.

## YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

Few question the genuine desire of churches to support young adults. But the snapshots I've shared here are reminders that ministry cannot survive on good intentions alone. In fact, when we miss or misunderstand young adults, we risk missing the chance to help—and we can even harm them as a result. Young adults need us to understand their perspectives and lived experiences now.

This is a good moment, one we'll offer at the end of each chapter, to invite you to take a few steps for yourself, for young adults, and for your congregation.

***For you.*** Think about the young adults you know. What do you appreciate about them? What is something that you sense you don't know or understand about them? Reflect or journal your thoughts.

***For young adults.*** Reach out to a young adult and ask them about one of the snapshots above. Invite them share a story or example about a topic that has impacted them personally.

***For your congregation.*** What's your hope for your congregation's young adult ministry? Jot down that dream and commit to regularly praying for it. Also, where might your congregation need to grow in understanding young adults? With whom might you share and discuss the information in the introduction and this first chapter? Why not reach out to someone to schedule that meet-up right now?

## CHAPTER 02

# FAITHING YOUNG ADULTS + GROWING YOUNG CHURCHES

Young adult ministry leaders get stuck in the middle.

You're probably the person with whom concerned congregation members voice their laments about young adults not showing up at your church. You're probably also the one with whom young adults express their feelings of being misunderstood or judged for factors often beyond their control.

Research conversations with young adult ministry leaders have captured the church tensions you face. One leader, Danielle, put it this way: "Young adults don't care about the church's institutional survival. They're facing real needs, loneliness, losing parents, and how to adapt [in a changing world]. With all this, perpetuating the system is not worth investing in. But if the church's purpose connects with their longings, they see it more worthwhile."<sup>25</sup>

Desmond, another young adult ministry leader, also wondered if Black young adults are ever going to come back, with many having a sour taste in their mouths when they think about the church's historic and current response to race and racial conflict in America.

Samantha puts it bluntly: "The young adults at our church want the church to get their act together."

The clash of perspectives sounds bleak and can feel stressful for those like you who feel caught in the middle. The good news, however, is that we've seen churches working hard to get their "acts together" to serve young adults. Because of this, we also get to hear stories like these:

*Last year, it was so hard. We got a lot of pushback from older adults in the church for focusing so much on young adults. However, our work last year has laid the foundation for us to do more this year. Older adults are sharing their stories, and recently, a 90-year-old said to me that he wants to grow as our church grows in reaching young people.*

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ANDREA, PASTOR

*I realized how meaningful it was to have questions and listening ears focused on my generation. It filled my love up in a way I didn't know was possible. To be part of the process, to be counted as 'worth it,' to be included, is amazing and it has fueled me with a desire to involve other young adults.*

---

DAVIS, YOUNG ADULT

These examples don't need to be anomalies. In fact, when leaders get beyond a hyper-focus on "who's attending church or not," they discover that there are a lot of well-meaning people who deeply love young adults, as well as a lot of young adults who want to love the church. When you can start with some shared hope, what follows is an invitation to reimagine the spiritual quests of young adults and discern how congregations can support them.

Here's even more hopeful news: you don't have to guess. Our research at FYI has prioritized listening and working with congregations and ministries just like yours. We've worked to discover faithful steps churches and leaders can take now to support young people in their faith formation and life trajectories.

To start (and maybe to your relief!), let's resist the urge to solve the young adult "problem" by rushing to create new programs. Our findings across multiple projects signal that ministries do the best with young adults when they start with *people* before *programs*.

*What does it look like to put people before our young adult ministry programs?*

*This means taking the time to understand those we seek to serve and resist making assumptions about who they are, what they want, and how we can help. In fact, when we understand them well, we begin to discover what young adults say they need from us the most.*

To get to this place of understanding, you'll likely need to help your church stop panicking over perspectives that misrepresent young adults.

## **HELP YOUR CHURCH STOP PANICKING BY REFRAMING THE STORIES THEY HEAR ABOUT YOUNG ADULTS' FAITH**

Chances are good that concerned church members have sent you articles on the state of young adults, their faith, and the church. These helpful (or maybe not-so-helpful) sources can leave you feeling disoriented and unsure what to address—or even where to start.

Read these next section headings like they're social media posts making bold statements that can evoke fear, blame, shame, or worry. You've read these. You've heard these. You've probably even tried to respond, but then deleted your comment! I'll offer data to reframe recurring themes that keep showing up on your social media feeds (or in the foyer after church services).

## *“Young adults are leaving the church.”*

This statement is often directed at those young adults who used to attend church or youth group when they were younger. Many parishioners don't see these familiar faces showing up after high school graduation and express understandable concern. At one level, their perceptions are accurate: attendance for young people does decline after high school. This drop, however, is hardly new.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, young adult church attendance decline has followed similar trends since the 1970s. Some blame college liberalism for the drop, but studies show that those young adults who do *not* attend college have lower churchgoing rates than those who do.<sup>27</sup>

While they may be attending church less, their reasons are rarely theological and don't have they necessarily mean that they've “lost their faith.” More likely, they're trying to figure out life on their own, get settled in a new community, and learn to adapt to a new schedule. Young adults leaving church may be less about protesting church and more a symptom of other priorities demanding their attention, crowding out their spiritual lives.<sup>28</sup>

**TALKING POINT:** *Young adults are in transition. How might we recognize their journeys and adjust our expectations about how they'll participate?*

It's also important to consider that in any relationship, it takes two to tango. Often there's been an overemphasis on young adults leaving church without church leaders reflecting on their own behaviors. If churches fail to reflect on their assumptions, attitudes, or actions, they may be creating barriers for young adults to connect with them.

I was talking with a group of adults in a church and the topic of “young adults leaving the church” came up. I casually suggested that if they held church at 9 pm rather than 9 am, they would probably see more young adults. The church members balked at the suggestion. I gently told them, “Now you know how young adults feel about your 9 am services.”

**TALKING POINT:** *Maybe young adults not showing up at our church is more about our lack of understanding than their lack of faithfulness. How might we change to support them?*

Finally, remember that the perception of “young adults leaving the church” often unduly rests on them showing up for weekly services. Journalist Emma Green reminds us, “The experience of those who are losing their religion shouldn’t obscure the experience of those who are finding it.”<sup>29</sup> Further, sociologist Nancy Tatom Ammerman suggests that “If we do not find [religion today] in the predictable places and the predictable forms as we did before, we cannot assume that it is disappearing.”<sup>30</sup>

The point is that while some young adults are leaving church, there are also stories of young adults finding God. A ministry approach that appreciates the wide range of stories rather than letting one monopolize the church’s view of young adults and their spiritual quests is likely to be more fruitful.



**TALKING POINT:** *Like you, I wish more young adults were in our church. But I know many of them who inspire me to follow Jesus. Let me tell you about one...*

### ***“Young adult ‘nones’ don’t believe in God.”***

The rise of the “nones”—who do not claim any religious affiliation—has drawn the attention of many Christians, as this non-religious identification has surpassed mainline Protestants and matched that of evangelicals. In fact, 29% of Americans identify as nones.<sup>31</sup> Similar studies report that 35% of those under the age of 35 hold this identity.

However, we must recognize that most nones still identify as theists, with only a small percentage claiming to be atheists.<sup>32</sup> So let’s be clear that “none” does not equal “atheist.”<sup>33</sup> Most young adults believe in God or a higher power and this can serve as a great starting point for spiritual conversations.

**SHARE THIS:** *Most religious “nones” believe in God or a higher power, so let’s find ways to connect with them rather than assume they don’t care about spirituality.*

### ***“Just wait, they’ll be back.”***

The likelihood that young adults will “eventually come back” is downward trending, and churches are waking up to a growing ministry gap between teenagers and young families. Absence of attention and resources sends a not-so-subtle message to young adults that they’re only welcome back into the church when they settle down, get married, and grow up. Churches assume this gap is, at a maximum, five years and seem to think they can wait it out. But young adults know it’s more like a decade and can’t wait for churches to understand. We need to remind our churches that they can’t delay, expecting young adults to simply return later, married with children. Instead, they can start appreciating young adults for who they are right now.

Also, remember that the ever-changing nature of life in one’s third decade means that while young adults may come back, it doesn’t mean they’ll stay. Among all age categories, young adulthood tops the most frequent transitions in living arrangements,<sup>34</sup> moving (on average) once every two years. Young adult ministry means that we’re willing to invest in young adults as their in-motion lives intersect with our congregations, no matter how long they stay.

**TALKING POINT:** *Instead of waiting for young adults to come back or worrying if they’ll leave, how could we get to know young adults in our community right now?*

With better framing, we can reinterpret the soundbites that trouble people, give them a broader perspective, and spark better conversations—the fruitful ones that we all want to have.

## HELP YOUR CHURCH SEE THAT FAITHING YOUNG ADULTS WILL (AND MUST) ENGAGE DOUBT

Sometimes it's hard to talk with young adults.

It can be even harder to talk with them about faith.

I've learned that faith conversations are challenging because faith is deeply personal. And the perception of a young person's faith journey is often misunderstood.

*Faith might be better understood as faithing.*<sup>35</sup> Faithing is a *verb*—an active process rather than a static state. For young adults, it often means they're renegotiating their beliefs as they encounter new experiences, learn new information, and even question their religious upbringings.<sup>36</sup> Faithing is work we all do, but it can be especially intense and vulnerable work for those in transition, such as young adults. Yet many will persevere because they want their faith to be reliable, able to keep up with their increasingly complex lives.

*Part of faithing is doubting.* For young adults, doubting is not rejecting faith, but trying to make sense of it. When faith is viewed as faithing, no one needs to panic and new conversations can emerge.

*Doubting can feel unfaithful, but we can remind young adults that it's not.* Too often, faith communities react to diverging beliefs and questions negatively and draw wrong, even hurtful conclusions that those expressing doubt have "lost their faith." Young adults often express they have experienced deep pain from faith communities who have misunderstood their spiritual searching.

*Faithing is more than getting the facts straight; it's about navigating faith together.* If young adults do not have confidence that they can work through their faithing in their church, they often feel forced to look elsewhere. From this perspective, "leaving" church may not be an act of unfaithfulness, but in fact an act of faithfulness as they intentionally search for communities who will walk alongside them rather than accuse or abandon them.<sup>37</sup>

When we accept the faithing of young adults, we acknowledge that they (and all of us) are in process. Questions, doubts, and differing views become welcomed topics for spiritual growth rather than religious threats. This shift opens up new possibilities for better conversations and relevant support.

The next chapters introduce strategies you can put into practice in your young adult ministry. For now, here are a few questions that invite young adults to share about their faithing and doubting so that you can start by focusing on *people* before tailoring your *program*. Remember, their answers are likely to reflect active faithing. Seek to understand rather than correct or debate.

*Can you share an experience when God felt close or far recently? What was that like for you?*

*How has your faith shifted or changed since high school?  
How has that shaped you?*

*What's something you believe that you think I don't (or our church doesn't)?*

*How can I pray for you? Is there anything up ahead that you're anticipating or avoiding?*

*Could I ask you to pray for me about what I'm anticipating or avoiding?*

## ***Growing Young: Six commitments every church needs and every young adult wants***

Once churches can see beyond the statements that skew their perceptions, new possibilities open up. But that's only half of the equation—the other half requires that churches actually change.

Our Growing Young research with over 250 churches brought to light six commitments of thriving churches, resulting in environments that young adults say are a support to their spiritual lives. I'll refer to these commitments throughout the book. Below are brief definitions of each. (If you find visuals helpful, find the "Growing Young wheel" in [Appendix 4](#).)

### ***Growing Young churches cultivate empathy***

At FYI, we glean a lot from Stanford University's "d.school" definition that empathy seeks to understand people: "the way they are doing things and why, their physical and emotional needs, how they think about the world, and what is meaningful to them."<sup>38</sup> Empathy is more than having good intentions. It's a discipline churches must master if they're going to support the young adults they care about. Ask a parishioner to describe a young adult and you'll get a sense of how empathetic they are.

### ***Growing Young churches know how to neighbor***

Churches who are the best neighbors ask, "Who is my neighbor?"<sup>39</sup> We root this thinking in Matthew 22, in which Jesus' rhetorical thrust is really, "Be the neighbor." Young adults want churches to do exactly that. They want churches to show who they are by how they treat their neighbors: First, because they want to know if a church is interested in more than self-preservation. They don't want to be part of a church to help it "feel younger." Second, the way churches treat their neighbors usually indicates how they'll treat the friends of young adults. Ask those in your congregation to name a young adult they know and then name this young adult's friends. The extent to which your community replies will give a fairly accurate sense of how neighborly your church is to young adults.

### ***Growing Young churches take Jesus and his message seriously***

For young adults, Jesus matters.<sup>40</sup> The life and priorities of Jesus are more compelling than abstract theology and traditions. Young adults want churches to follow Jesus, as optimistic or unrealistic as that might be. In other words, if Jesus said it or did it, young adults expect congregations to do the same: feed the poor, care for the homeless, turn weapons into plowshares, love, forgive, accept, prioritize the one over the 99, and more. Yes, life and theology are more complicated than that, but young adult Christians are compelled by Jesus and they challenge churches to be, as well.

### ***Growing Young churches nurture a warm community***

Young people value churches that embody warmth more than they do an air-tight belief statement or a perfect program.<sup>41</sup> You don't have to have one at the expense of others, but research does show that the values and beliefs of older generations are best passed along through the conduit of warm relationships. Cold, impersonal relationships often make young people reject the beliefs of their elders. Interestingly, older adults tend to think their church is much warmer than young adults experience it.

### ***Growing Young churches prioritize young people everywhere***

Young people, especially young adults, don't want to be relegated to a special group separate from the congregation. They want to be seen in the sanctuary, the budget, the decisions, and the calendar.<sup>42</sup> This priority affirms something powerful: when churches prioritize young adults, the whole church benefits. That's because young adults want to be more than "tolerated" by congregations. They want to know if the church needs them there for the whole church to grow into a better community.

### *Growing Young churches exercise keychain leadership*

Keychain leadership captures something significant that we saw in Growing Young churches: it describes how older church members are willing to “share the keys” of trust, respect, power, and influence with younger people.<sup>43</sup> They give younger leaders a chance to lead, create, try, fail, and grow. This is more than a catchy tactic. For young adults, it may be one of the most potent assets churches can offer them.

## **FAITHING YOUNG ADULTS + GROWING YOUNG CHURCHES**

Thriving young adult ministry celebrates faithing young adults and works at Growing Young core commitments. May this chapter give you hope that your role is more than being stuck in the middle as the default fixer for all disconnection between young adults and your faith community. Instead, you can be a bridge-builder who works to bring the best of both church and young adults together, setting up possibilities where everyone can flourish.

## YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

As a young adult ministry leader, you have a lot of requests coming at you. Take a minute and reflect on this chapter, especially about the sections that may immediately be most helpful to you.

**For you.** Of the statements about young adults and their spiritual lives listed in this chapter, which do you hear most in your congregation and how have you typically responded? How might you respond differently?

**For young adults.** What might it look like for you to approach young adults' spiritual lives as a faithing process? Take a minute to pray that you may be open to the spiritual conversations they really want to have with you. Act on your prayer by reaching out and starting a conversation or two over coffee!

**For your congregation.** Review the six Growing Young core commitments. From your perspective, which commitments does your church do best and which ones need more attention? Who of your church leaders would benefit from hearing your observations?



## CHAPTER 03

# COMPASSIONATE YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

I frequently remind ministry leaders about one simple truth: just because you were young once doesn't mean you understand young people today.

Sasha, a young adult ministry leader, said it better: "I had to make a personal transition from my experience to their experience."

To be honest, I'm not sure I always do well at taking my own advice. After all, I'm a tenured professor of youth, family, and culture at a respected seminary. I earned my PhD studying the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults. I've logged years of ministry experience and single-handedly kept the coffee industry afloat with all the meet-ups I've had with young adults. But I confess that I still make unfounded assumptions, often based on my own experiences.

I felt this dissonance just recently.

"Emerging Adult Spirituality and Ministry" is a course I designed out of my research. I know the material well and my colleagues tell me I'm an expert on young adults. Yet no matter my success with a previous class, my current students need something new from me. There's no "plug and play" in education or ministry. Students bring their personal and unique experiences as the world keeps changing, raising new questions and wanting to discuss the fresh challenges that they face.

This particular quarter, I decided to try a more proactively reflective approach with my teaching assistant. Esther Kang is a brilliant graduate student who had previously taken my class. We met weekly to talk about the students' experience, progress, and assignments. I invited Esther to tell me how she experienced the class—what did

she see, feel, find helpful, or think confusing? To Esther's credit, her responses were honest. As a female Korean American emerging adult, her social location positioned her to notice and experience elements about the class that I missed.

I was the expert, yet she taught me every week.

For example, I thought a topic I presented was relevant. She pointed out that some assumptions I made were "N/A" (non-applicable) for some students in our class because their contexts were completely different.

I gave what I thought was a great example to illustrate a point. She wondered if my approach reinforced White normativity, creating barriers to students' learning.

I thought I missed an opportunity in a class. She said the students appreciated my humanity.

I was sure the discussion question I asked was completely clear. She suggested that the question could be interpreted differently, creating the class silence.

I mused over why some students reached out and others didn't. She helped me see that some cultural backgrounds make approaching a professor intimidating.

I'll be honest, this was one of my hardest and yet most enriching quarters. It was hard because I take pride in knowing my stuff and being a pretty good educator. Esther's critiques often left me feeling unbalanced, out of touch, and even afraid that I might be letting my students down. Yet it was enriching because Esther helped me get to know my students all over again.

Esther and I both took risks. She took a chance to be honest with her professor—a courageous act. I opened myself to Esther's feedback. I think we both became better people and we believe we served our students well because of it.<sup>44</sup>

I'm sure you're glad my quarter had a happy ending, but don't miss the point: there are two temptations that can easily lead young adult ministry leaders astray. The first is assuming we understand our young adults today. The second is thinking

we have, or should have, all the answers. Cultivating compassion is an antidote to perpetuating ministry blind spots and alienating young adults. To be more effective, start by honing your empathy skills—and don't stop.

## EMPATHY IS FOR (RE)DISCOVERING YOUR YOUNG ADULTS

Compassionate young adult ministry begins with empathy. (I'm starting with the assumption that you *have* empathy, of course!) You wouldn't be in ministry if you didn't care about people. Yet empathy is more than a feeling—it's an actual skill that helps us tune in to the people we serve.<sup>45</sup> Ministry's shadow side can pull focus away from people and distract us with programs. Empathy keeps young adults at the center.

People before programs. Always.

Jesus' actions throughout the gospels echo empathy. And it's expressed through his questions: *What do you want? Do you want to get well?* Rarely does Jesus start with, *Here's what you need, or You need to get healthy.*<sup>46</sup> His empathy elevates compassion and connection first—Jesus cares about the dignity of those he loves and serves, not just about fixing them.

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*People before programs. Always.*

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## BARRIERS TO EMPATHY

Up to this point, we've looked at a lot of data about the worlds in which young adults live, but that information won't be enough. Empathy moves from reading statistics to engaging young adults face-to-face by trying to understand their perspectives, feelings, and needs. It has the potential to move and even change

us, which is why empathy can feel uncomfortable. Even with good intentions, two barriers in particular can obstruct us from empathy: intragenerational speed and closeness bias.

### *Intragenerational speed*

Understanding young adults is harder today, not simply because of obvious intergenerational differences, but also because of the speed at which society is changing. The dramatic pace of current technological, scientific, medical, economic, and sociological shifts is creating more differences between generations than ever before. This is why it's challenging for older generations to connect with young adults. Their life trajectories and choices are so different that there's increasingly less common, experiential ground on which to relate.<sup>47</sup>

But there's more to consider. Because of *intragenerational* speed, shared life experiences within generations are also diminishing. For example, churches we researched who have tried merging ministry to those in their 20s and 30s discovered that there's a broad diversity between those young adults' experiences. Beyond differences in marital status or career advancement, today's older and younger young adults have dramatically different childhood and teenage experiences that shaped and are shaping the way they look at the world.

Maybe your faith community thinks you're a great leader to young adults because you're "one of them," but you're realizing that those you serve seem so different from you. They are—and you are—experiencing intragenerational speed.

### *Closeness bias*

Closeness bias claims that the closer people are relationally, the less likely they are to pay attention. Research reveals that close relationships breed familiarity and familiarity reinforces one's assumptions about family members, friends, partners, and kids. Think about predictable family arguments or the way some long-time friends treat you even though you're grown up now. We all relate to these

experiences in some way. Similarly, closeness bias lets assumptions about young adults—rather than attention to them—drive your ministry actions.<sup>48</sup>

I've talked with many ministry leaders who have confessed to trying young adult ministry events that failed miserably even though they promoted them well and promised everything from great food to awesome prizes. When asked how much input they received from young adults as they planned, most admitted that they hadn't talked with any because the event seemed so obviously awesome or it had been a success before. This is a great example of closeness bias blinding ministry leaders who had great intentions.

Compassionately caring for young adults means ensuring that we, as leaders, don't fall to closeness bias or misjudge intragenerational speed. Instead, lead with empathy by listening.

## THE KEY TO EMPATHY IS LISTENING

Since one of the most crucial elements for getting adults and young adults to work together is mutual understanding, FYI's research cohort met in a large room with circular tables to encourage dialogue and collaboration. At one point, we had a panel of young adults share their own stories and experiences with their churches. While we gave panelists questions in advance to prepare, we didn't know what they were going to say or how honest their answers would be. Sharing some of the pressures he felt as a young adult, one participant talked about how hard it was to discuss his life with those in his church because he thought he would be misunderstood or judged.

His senior pastor was in the audience. During the Q&A period, this pastor stood up. I was getting ready to jump in to diffuse any tension that might surface, but then the pastor said this:

“

*I want to say publicly to you,  
I'm so sorry.*

*I had no idea you were going through that.*

*But you're right, I haven't been listening.*

*I've let you down and I want to do better.*

”

My panic transformed into a desire to do a group hug and wrap up the event right there. This was a watershed moment for two reasons: first, a young adult took a risk to be honest. Second, this pastor was willing to listen, empathize, and, in this case, apologize.

Empathy changes us and can change our relationships.

It seeks to understand young adults' perspectives, not judge them. It requires commitment to be vigilant in listening long enough to learn from the young adults we serve and even admit that we've misunderstood them.<sup>49</sup> As you read on, I'll offer some listening resources to help. But first, there's a bit more we need to say about empathy, young adults, and their friends.

## **BEING THE BEST NEIGHBORS MEANS SEEING YOUNG ADULTS' FRIENDS**

Empathy has an expansive nature to it. It broadens ministry vision to see not only young adults, but their friends, too.

Growing Young research discovered that young people trust faith communities who strive to be good neighbors. Good news isn't just for insiders, but for everyone. In fact, good news really isn't good news unless it's good news for all.

Being the best neighbors means congregations must reach beyond theological and social issues to see the people impacted by beliefs and policies. For young adults, the issues most important to them connect with names and faces.

They want to talk about immigration because their families are impacted.

They question your stance on LGBTQ relationships because they love their gay friends.

They challenge gun ownership because they grew up with school lockdowns and witnessed tragedies among their peers.

They worry about national debt and their own college loans.

They feel stuck between their church's pro-life convictions and walking with their friends through difficult choices.

They protest racial injustice out of solidarity with their friends and community.

They're concerned about healthcare policy because they can't personally afford to get sick.

Your church can be the best neighbor to young adults and their friends by recognizing that the most pressing concerns facing them are rarely easy, never simple, and usually personal. Too often, leaders make young adults choose between their faith or their friends—leaving them feeling isolated and discouraged. Young adults seek integration of their life and faith and want you to journey with them to find it.

## **LOOK THROUGH NEW LENSES OF IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND PURPOSE**

When we experience the privilege of hearing young adults share their lives with us, we have a responsibility to respond to their needs and serve them well. FYI's work on multiple research projects has revealed that, like all of us, young adults seek to make sense of their identity, belonging, and purpose.

## *Identity and identities: Who am I?*

Developmentally, young adults have grown in their cognitive capacity and the personal agency to begin naming and understanding their own identity—rather than the one inherited from their parents, mentors, or communities. Family and community influence may help or hurt, but young adults are learning to answer this question for themselves and identify with who they are.<sup>50</sup>

What makes the question *Who am I?* challenging for young adults is that the answer may be multifaceted. After all, a person doesn't merely have an identity—they have identities. The question *Who am I?* calls young adults to discern how their gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religious tradition intersect to make them them. The work of harmonizing these identities can often be wrought with contradictions and tension.

Quite a number of ministry leaders from our research cohorts expressed how young adults in their communities viewed their identities within the context of their family, ethnicity, and community. They grounded their identities in these three factors far more than previous generations do. Unlike for those over age 30, young adult identity today is more about family, ethnicity, and community than vocation, self-sufficiency, or institutional loyalty.

Other ministry leaders spoke of their young adults holding a subtle tension between who they saw themselves to be and the person they wanted to become. Some ministry teams described theirs as having “hidden” aspirations and ambitions, uncertain about disclosing their future selves. Part of this hiddenness may be young adults still learning to articulate who they see themselves to be<sup>51</sup> or dissonance between self-perception and the pressure they feel to be perfect.<sup>52</sup> Young adults may also hide their true selves until they're certain adults can be trusted.<sup>53</sup>

Regarding Christian identity, remember that young adults have reached a crucial period in their lives when they are more skilled at reflecting on their religious and spiritual upbringings. This essential personal work may result in them embracing, leaving, or integrating their spiritual identities.<sup>54</sup> Most Christian young adults want



to be faithful, but need supportive communities that give them room to harmonize the many elements that make up their identities.<sup>55</sup>

Let's remember that when we attend to our young adults, we don't have to quickly analyze. Empathy calls us to simply pay attention, supporting them in their journey toward a clearer and more reliable sense of identity.

### *Home and belonging: Where do I fit?*

Most young adults will enter a phase when they're moving away from home in different ways: physically (for school, job, military, gap year, etc.), positionally (in that their schedules no longer orbit around parental figures), and emotionally (as they find and develop new relationships in community).

Belonging can be challenging for young adults whose lives are punctuated by short-term commitments and in-motion lives. Some find it hard to invest in friends because they don't see themselves setting down roots in their existing community. Friendship also means saying goodbye, which is hard when transition feels like it's always around the corner. Even the concept of *home* shifts as they ponder whether it's where they currently live or the place in which they grew up, with family of origin or with the friends they see on a daily basis.

For young adults, "Friendsgiving" is becoming just as significant as Thanksgiving as they begin to define home more by the people they do life with than the place they live.<sup>56</sup> Just this last Thanksgiving, several young adults visiting my home shared their stories of loss, pain, and disconnect with their families of origin. For them, being with friends rather than family made for a more peaceful holiday.

Churches who count on young adults coming back may need to check their assumptions. "Coming home" to church may not happen if young adults—while grateful for their past—no longer see your faith community as their home church. Their relational quests for home are changing. Can you see this in them?

### ***Purpose: What difference can I make?***

More than any other, the third decade shapes a young adult's life trajectory. They feel this so deeply that age 30 is often a very real and daunting marker of when they expect to have traction: a career, a relationship, and beliefs that animate their lives.

Multiple transitions complicate this quest for purpose. We call the third decade of life the transition decade because it's the period where young adults are, at a meta-level, transitioning to adulthood. And yet, peppered throughout this decade are actually multiple transitions: relational, vocational, and spiritual. Being in a state of change isn't necessarily negative as young adults enter transitional spaces to pursue their life goals. These spaces are exciting, exhausting, terrifying, and even inspiring for young adults because they feel their very life trajectories are at stake.

For young people, purpose develops as it becomes more stable and long-lasting, has a goal, is personally meaningful, and contributes to the greater good.<sup>57</sup> Churches are ideal communities to support young adults as they dream and can encourage them while they develop their gifts so that they can refine the difference they want to make in the world. To start, help young adults in your ministry overcome these hurdles:

#### **"I'M BUSY."**

Acknowledging their busyness is an empowering first step.<sup>58</sup> A young adult's quest for purpose may flourish as you help them focus on their interests rather than on doing more. Guide them to discern where their interests and desire to serve overlap.

#### **"I'M UNSURE."**

Sometimes young adults struggle with purpose because they don't feel confident in their gifts or abilities.<sup>59</sup> Acknowledge their

giftedness and encourage them to lean in with questions such as, *What's your gift to the world and how are you developing it?*

**“THERE ARE SO MANY OPTIONS.”**

Young adults have more vocational options than previous generations.<sup>60</sup> This can be exciting while also overwhelming. The great news for faith communities is that you can create opportunities for them to try out their gifts, process their options, and support their vocational decisions. They likely don't need more information, but rather more support as they faithfully explore their callings.

Young adults want to make a difference in the world. With support, their big dreams can develop into meaningful vocations.

## **IF YOU WANT MEANINGFUL YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW, JOIN THEM ON THEIR JOURNEY**

Understanding the young adult quest for identity, belonging, and purpose will offer new insights to support the young adults you care about. Their lives are varied and diverse, making young adult ministry hard because one size cannot fit all. Yet the common through-line from FYI's research emphasizes that this quest impacts every part of their lives.

Here's a quick-reference summary for you to consider as you shape the purpose and goals of your young adult ministry. Keep coming back to this table and use it as a compass for discernment.

	QUESTION	YOUNG ADULTS' QUEST	YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY
IDENTITY	Who am I?	How do I harmonize my multiple identities?	How might we support young adults' harmonizing work? How can we provide support for them to articulate who they see themselves to be now and in the future?
BELONGING	Where do I fit?	How do I redefine, establish, or honor "home" in the midst of my temporary, in-motion life?	How might we be one of many supporting communities in which a young adult can trust and feel at home? What will it take to invest in them relationally?
PURPOSE	What difference can I make?	Will I reach age 30 with traction while navigating multiple transitions to get there?	How might we accompany young adults as they seek their purpose and navigate transitions? What resources can we use to encourage their questions and dreams?

### *Listening for the long haul*

Renewed listening is more than a suggestion—it's a necessity. During our research cohorts, we prepared every ministry team with a list of suggested prompts and asked them to arrange conversations with a wide range of young adults in their church—not just a few favorites. Once leaders spent time listening, teams got together to compare notes and write a summary of what they heard. The point was not to evaluate or judge, but to try carefully capturing young adults' perspectives.

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*Ministry happens in every compassionate move that we make for the sake of our young adults.*

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From the responses churches received as they listened, I've created what we now call the *Young Adult Vignette*:

*We are compassionate, loving, creative people,  
raising more questions than we have answers.  
It's likely we'll define ourselves more by who "we're  
not" than who "we are."*

*Our friends notice our abilities,  
but we still feel like imposters.  
Often, we're guessing and overthinking everything in  
our world that offers so many options with so few milestones.*

*"Community" and "home" are elusive concepts.  
For us, "home" is about  
the people we're with,  
not the place we're at.*

*Oftentimes our friends are, literally, our family.*

*Our best experiences of community have been from  
high school or college friendships.  
And we've struggled to find anything close to that kind  
of connection since.*

*For some of us, a pandemic abruptly cut off those friendships  
or cut short our options to forge new connections  
in an isolated and socially distant time warp.*

*Our search to belong is one of our most pressing  
quests, greatest stressors, biggest disappointments,  
and loneliest endeavors.*

*Our friendships change with every move and  
every relational status update,  
making us relationally cautious and selectively loyal.*

*We want to make it in this world.  
A career would be great.  
Having more options would be better.  
Not because we're unrealistic,  
but because we're forced to live improvisational lives.*

*We try to do it all  
in hopes that something might stick.*

*Our uncertainties eclipse our opportunities.  
Racial, gender, and economic obstacles  
add to this challenge.*

*Our internal obstacles of self-doubt and perfectionism  
are just as real.*

*We all feel behind,  
always trying to "catch up" in some part of our lives.*

*Someday we hope to say we're  
married,  
a parent,  
a homeowner,  
at least, part of a neighborhood, and  
successful.*

*Our hopes look sort of like the American dream,  
but our paths and motivations differ.*

*We're anxious, sometimes at dangerous levels.  
As the world expects so much of us,  
and we expect so much from ourselves,  
it seems incredibly easy to let everyone down.*

*Even God.*

*Who is,  
simultaneously,  
good, vague, distant, caring, and confusing.*

*We love our churches, who have given us support  
and hope in our best and worst of times.  
And we're inspired when they resist consumerism,  
advocate to address climate change,  
bring up mental health,  
and seek to help others.*

*Still, we find churches confusing.  
They don't like our friends  
or just can't see them the way we do.  
They're uncomfortable with grey-area topics, but  
that's where we live.*

*We see a disparity in the way they treat gender, race,  
ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ability level,  
and we don't understand why their traditions matter  
if they hurt people.*

*Sometimes it's hard to break in.  
We wish they'd admit they're working through their own stuff  
rather than just trying to fix us.*

*At times, we've been hurt by them.  
We just need them to know that.  
Offering an apology would mean more to us  
than offering another program.*

*Remember that our lives are in motion,  
so we may not stay long.  
No offense.*

*Churches: just don't give up on us.  
You offer good news to us.  
And we can offer good news to you, too.*

I've read this vignette to cohorts, classes, and young adult gatherings. Each time I do, I see nods and tears. Young adults have told me that it feels good to be heard, understood, and taken seriously.

Some might ask, *But when do we really start doing young adult ministry?* My reply is that ministry happens in every compassionate move we make for the sake of our young adults.

## YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

This chapter has offered some lenses to help your ministry look at young adults from new and renewed perspectives. Compassionately lean in to reconnect with your young adults by trying the following:

**For you.** Reflect on the vignette above. Can you catch the identity, belonging, and purpose statements? How might practicing listening through these lenses give you a deeper appreciation for the joys and concerns that young adults share with you?

**For young adults.** Start with listening to your own young adults with special attention to identity, belonging, and purpose. Make a list of who you'd like to talk with and ask your young adults for help and feedback. Check out the listening exercise in [Appendix 1](#) to get you started. Or try this: give them a copy of the vignette and ask them to highlight the phrases that speak to them the most.

**For your congregation.** Summarize themes you're hearing from listening to your young adults. Reflect back what you're hearing to see how they resonate or correct your interpretations. Share affirmed themes with others in your church to help them understand young adults better.



## CHAPTER 04

# CREATIVE YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

In our research focus groups, ministry leaders shared that many of them inherited young adult ministry responsibilities when they became their church's youth ministry leader because it was assumed they already had relationships with young adults who had been teenagers in their ministry. Some were deemed close to the same age, "So you 'get' them." Most also admitted that along with churches' assumptions came big expectations that they'll "save" young adult ministry.

Whew.

The challenge is that ministry with young adults rarely follows traditional youth ministry approaches. Yet because of the lack of resources and time, we noticed that many leaders resort to what we call "default imaginations." When this happens, leaders rely on their past ministry instincts and default towards events, ideas, or successes that worked for them in previous contexts. Default imaginations are easy to catch in yourself or others, as they typically start with phrases like, *You know, one time we did this event and... or When I was in my twenties...*

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*Ministry with young adults rarely follows traditional youth ministry approaches.*

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We've all been there (so no shame!), but let's admit it: default imaginations rarely serve us well. Leaders in FYI's cohorts and focus groups confessed that many of their attempts to resurrect past successes failed miserably.

They created events that no one attended.

They reached out to young adults only to be ghosted.

They promised their congregations inspiring results and their churches are still waiting.

They excitedly transitioned their in-person ministries online during the pandemic only to realize that young adults were “Zoomed out.”

Maybe you can relate to the struggle. Most young adult ministry leaders shared how these ministry fails zap their confidence and compound anxiety, making their work feel more like guessing than discipleship.

The alternative solution to default imagination is to bring creativity to young adult ministry.

Honestly, it's easy to be skeptical about “creativity” because it sounds like a ton of work. It calls for time and effort that most simply don't have. You may not consider yourself a creative type. And you feel the sole pressure from your church to reach, save, and connect young adults—now.

Hang in there. I believe you can creatively shape your ministry by focusing on just two areas where young adults say they're most eager to connect their lives with their faith: Jesus and community.

## **YOUNG ADULTS FOLLOWING JESUS INTO THEIR UNFOLDING LIVES**

Debra, a young adult attending one of our cohort churches, shared, “Making God a part of everything is easily said from the pulpit, but practicing to follow Jesus feels possible when you sit with other Christians and process it out loud at someone's house with good food and no pressure.”

Process out loud.

Good food.

No pressure.

Debra's reflection was encouraging for any ministry leader looking for anything that might work. But her words also offer a challenge: young adults need something different than one-size-fits-all programming.

Our research on young adult ministry and innovation revealed that creativity is more than guessing or brainstorming.<sup>61</sup> Instead, it's an attempt to intentionally respond in the ways that young adults say they need us—and Jesus—the most. Debra desires to follow Jesus and admits that she needs help processing out loud with no pressure. Her statement captures what we discovered from our Growing Young research: young adults thrive when faith communities take Jesus seriously and foster a warm community.

### *Young adults taking Jesus seriously*

Young adults like Debra resonate with Jesus' life. They are most compelled by the way he really cared for people and lived for compassion, justice, equality, peace, and reconciliation. Jesus practically demonstrates and inspires love, forgiveness, fairness, and even sacrifice. While spirituality can feel abstract for young adults, Jesus makes faith something that's everyday, personal, and doable.

My colleagues Kara Powell and Brad Griffin describe discipleship as “our everyday yes to Jesus.”<sup>62</sup> Jesus is not an abstraction, but a reliable source for young adults negotiating a life filled with transitions and decisions. The choices they make now have the potential to impact the trajectory of the rest of their lives, including their spiritual lives. Young adults need support and creative approaches as they discern what saying “yes” to Jesus looks like.

Ministry leader Jordan reflected about her interaction with Isabella, a young adult:

*I remember my conversations with Isabella, a social media guru, who, through our ministry work, regained a sense of how her faith and her passion for social justice could intersect. She is still questioning exactly what she thinks about the church, but she was encouraged to see that her skill set [marketing and public relations] could combine with her passion [to work for justice] and all of that could be fueled by her faith in Jesus.*

Jordan helped Isabella feel connected with her church and experience more freedom to integrate her vocation and faith.

The creative work of ministry focuses on helping young adults connect with what seem like divergent life pieces (in Isabella's case marketing, social justice, and faith) and to help them follow Jesus with their whole selves.

Notice that Isabella doesn't need Jordan to provide her with special programs or events. She needs Jordan to help her follow Jesus in light of her gifts, convictions, and challenges. Young adults need you to be creative as you help them follow Jesus today, tomorrow, and into the future they're making for themselves.

Creative young adult ministry, then, is as simple as asking good questions about life and Jesus. Remember that your young adults care about following Jesus and want to say "yes" to him with their lives. Often the challenge for them is how to go about it—and that's where they need you as a conversation partner.

To help, start compiling questions that empower young adults to connect their lives with Jesus' life. Here are a few to get you started:

*How has your faith inspired your desire to work in your professional field?*

*How have your studies and training resonated with or challenged your faith? What new questions are emerging for you as a result?*

*What leaders do you think emulate Jesus-like qualities? How do they inspire your own living?*

*When Jesus encourages us to rest, what does that look like for your own life, and why do you think that could be important?*

*How are you connecting Jesus' message of forgiveness with the way you treat others, or even how you talk to yourself?*

*How does following Jesus influence your spending, dating, working, politics, goals, and more?*

These are not pop-quiz questions that will evoke quick responses or even “correct” answers. They’re invitations to conversation through which young adults will feel invited to try on answers, work through tensions, and voice possibilities as they seek to say “yes” to Jesus every day. Further, this invitation to dialogue encourages you to be prepared to answer your own questions. Your commitment shows personal investment, invites dialogue, and models your own willingness to learn and grow.

## *Young adults taking Jesus' narratives seriously*

When we seek to follow Jesus, we don't always get it right.

In fact, you may find that in some of your conversations, responses are confusing, contradictory, and even contrary to the life Jesus calls the young adult to. Many leaders have expressed concern that empathy and conversations permit poor behavior and that some should be confronted and corrected. I can appreciate this sentiment, but I also advise caution: often this approach is short-sighted, possibly motivated more out of adults' discomfort than young adults' benefit.

Developmentally, most young adults don't respond well to being told what to believe or do. In a period of life when they're learning to make and own their decisions, choices are important to their agency in making faith their own.

We don't have to remain silent, however. What's required is that we approach conversations in ways that honor them as they make spiritual sense of their world.

FYI's research team learned that one of the key traits to creative response is to understand what narratives are driving young adults' thoughts, feelings, and actions. In other words, when you see one acting, deciding, or responding in a particular way, suspend judgment on their behaviors until you seek to understand the narrative influencing those behaviors. These are called *current narratives*.

## *Current narratives*

All of us carry current narratives. For young adults, they're the mix of stories, beliefs, and experiences influencing how they respond in various circumstances. Current narratives can sometimes serve people well and other times fail them, causing young adults to reconsider their identity, belonging, and purpose. This frequent and common occurrence can be challenging and vulnerable. Think about what it's like...

...when Jasmine realizes that her career pursuits are impacting her physical health.

...when Cory discovers that his need for relationships comes from his fear of being alone.

...when Bishop admits that he doesn't want to try because he can't bear failing and not appearing perfect.

...when Autumn becomes disillusioned because even though she was a good, religious girl, bad things happen to her family.

...when Dustin realizes that he really doesn't like business after all.

Renegotiating one's current narratives can also be inspiring when young adults take big steps to help them refine their identity, belonging, and purpose, like...

...when Oscar embraces his ethnic heritage and no longer feels pressure to fit in or erase his identity.

...when Veronica shares her opinion as she's finding her own voice.

...when Edmund makes that last student loan payment and starts saving for his future.

...when Dominique seeks counseling not because she's "messed up," but because she wants to intentionally process some events in her life.

Young adult ministry leaders can be the ones who acknowledge the helpful current narratives that young adults hold. You can provide an opportunity for better conversations rather than making out-of-context judgments on their behaviors. Young adults need these better conversations with you to help them take their next faithful steps.

One of the challenges of listening for current narratives is that you end up having to hold a lot more stories about young adults' lives. They can be beautiful, hard, inspiring, and overwhelming! Here are some helpful tips as you hear and sit with your young adults' current narratives.

### **TELL ME MORE**

For many of us, a knee-jerk reaction to hearing others' current narratives is to respond with quick advice on fixing the problem or healing the hurt. Out of compassion, we feel a responsibility to make things right. But first impressions are often incomplete. And young adults must learn to be agents of their own lives—so rushing in with a solution doesn't help them grow. A great way to slow down and listen deeply is to simply respond with, *Tell me more*. Open yourself—and your young adults—up by inviting dialogue.

### **DO A SELF-CHECK**

Sometimes current narratives evoke feelings and memories from our own stories. Because of this, our reactions might be rooted in our own experiences rather than theirs. A discipline I practice in my teaching is to journal after every class. I ask myself questions like, *Where did I bring my best self? Why did I respond to that student in that way? When was I clear or unclear?* Recognize that when you encounter others' current narratives, it often evokes awareness of your own.

For creative ministry, the next faithful step guides your young adults toward a Jesus-centered narrative.



## *Jesus-centered narratives*

If Jesus is a young adult's inspiration, they value spiritual mentors who help them live like and follow Jesus. In essence, a Jesus-centered narrative embodies the good news that Jesus has a hope-filled vision for their quest towards identity, belonging, and purpose.

Correcting behaviors alone rarely helps young adults find their way. What they really seek is a reliable narrative that can guide them. Their theological imaginations need encouragement to believe that they can be forgiven, they're worth it, they're a part of a family of faith, their actions impact others, and what they do actually matters. This is the good news they're seeking—and what the gospel practically offers.

Let's return to ministry leader Jordan and young adult Isabella for a moment.

Isabella was asking some challenging questions about her faith and her vocation. She wondered if her vocational interests had any connection with her faith and started believing she would need to keep the two separate, focusing on her work during the week and trying to be faithful to God in another way. Jordan noticed that Isabella wasn't deeply involved at church, as she was often busy with her career. Jordan could have misinterpreted this to mean Isabella wasn't serious about her relationship with God or didn't really care about church. Jordan's misread on Isabella's current narrative could have led her to judge wrongly. Jordan might also have panicked and decided that she needed to come up with an event or program that would be interesting to Isabella and her friends. The ministry connection might have been lost if Jordan had misread Isabella's current narrative.

But when Jordan sought to understand Isabella's narrative by patiently seeking to dialogue (tell me more), she didn't panic (self-check). Instead, Jordan began to hear the dissonance that Isabella felt between her vocational aspirations and her Christian convictions. Isabella wanted to be faithful to what was important to her and to what she felt was her best contribution to the world. This was where Isabella needed Jordan's advice and support.

Now Jordan can work with Isabella to discern a better, more reliable Jesus-centered narrative. Through discipleship, deeper conversations help new possibilities emerge. Isabella is exploring ways to integrate faith and vocation, equipping her to harmonize her life rather than compartmentalizing it. Meanwhile, Jordan is finding better ways to encourage Isabella by tapping into her gifts, seeking her advice, and asking her about her work. Isabella feels supported and inspired.

As you develop skills and listen for young adults' current narratives, you'll discover the deeper, more honest topics they're working through. Your next move will be to work alongside young adults to discern the more reliable, Jesus-centered narrative they are searching for. Finding the Jesus-centered narrative is rarely straightforward or simple because young adults' lives are complex. Work toward them by asking:

**WHO'S TELLING YOU THAT, AND WHAT MESSAGE MIGHT JESUS OFFER INSTEAD?**

Young adults often have influential people in their lives who have shaped their current narratives. Sometimes they don't realize that particular people—present or past—profoundly impact the way they see themselves and live their lives. When you hear a young adult say, *I should do this* or *I have to become that*, ask them to pause for a moment and ask, *Who's telling you that?* Encourage them to unpack the influences in their lives. Then, follow up by asking, *What do you think Jesus might say to you?* They may have an answer or they may be unsure. Either way, this is a great opportunity to explore Scripture together to discover the way that God sees them and what God wants for them.

### **WHAT'S YOUR NEXT FAITHFUL STEP?**

Faithing reminds us that spirituality is always changing and growing. It's more than an intellectual exercise. We can help young adults shift from their current narratives to a more Jesus-centered one by asking, *So, what's your next faithful step?* Not only does this call them to tangible action rather than reflection alone, but it also empowers them to take ownership of their own spiritual growth. Finally, it sets them up for success by breaking their goals down to one faithful step at a time.

Creative young adult ministry flips our ministry approach by acknowledging that we don't need to get young adults to be interested in Jesus because many of them already are. The task is to foster connection at the intersections of their greatest needs and aspirations.

## **WARMING UP TO A NEW KIND OF YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY**

If every Isabella had a Jordan, young adults would feel deeply supported by their faith communities. Let's work toward this but also be realistic. That relationship took time and effort, and there's only so much of a young adult ministry leader to go around. Here's where you must rely on your faith community. This approach isn't just for practicality—our Growing Young research revealed that young adults want to feel that they're a part of a supportive congregation.

In my conversations with young adults, I often hear them admit a suspicion they have about churches. When they check out websites and listen to a few sermon

podcasts, what they really want to know is, *Can I trust this community? or, Is it safe?* This doesn't mean young adults don't care about theology or are worried about getting their feelings hurt. It's that they care about an embodied faith that can be expressed in authentic and honest relationships where there is room to grow, question, and even make mistakes.

Through our Growing Young research, we discovered that relational warmth in churches is important to young adults. Warmth is described as feeling "like a family," where church life and everyday life blur and authentic relationships grow.<sup>63</sup> Other research indicates that relational warmth and closeness are the conduits for shared spiritual experiences that carry on to the next generation.<sup>64</sup> Warm communities are supportive and trustworthy. Cold communities are distant and unreliable.

I often remind my students, of whom most are young adults, that they don't learn when they're afraid.

Fear keeps them from asking questions, offering honest opinions, or being open to others' ideas. Frightened students play it safe and do the minimum to get by.

I then tell my classes that in order for us to risk learning, we have to trust each other, believe in each other, hope for each other, and even love each other. Only then do we open ourselves up to learning and becoming.

Young adults seek warm communities.

They won't grow spiritually if they're afraid.

They'll "do church," but won't risk following Jesus with you.

Young adults want to risk following Jesus with your faith community—if you're a warm community. Ministry leaders can inspire warm congregations by collaborating with young adults, recognizing limitations, and fostering unity.

## *Warmth collaborates rather than delegates*

In a research focus group made up of all young adults, I asked participants to describe some of their experiences with churches. They offered a few tame answers that seemed like the responses they thought I wanted to hear. Finally, one opened up to share how he truly desired to be connected with his church—and then added, “but we don’t like the bait and switch.”

I’ll never forget how the energy of solidarity among the other young adults erupted after that comment. It felt like everyone in the room understood his meaning except for me. Eager to catch up, I asked them to describe what he meant.

They all chimed in, explaining how most churches approach them in two steps. Step 1 (the bait) is when adults say how much they love young people and really want them to be in their community. They usually don’t have to wait long for Step 2 (the switch), when a church member says, “So we need you to start this ministry and join that group and volunteer for this event and...” The young adults admitted that they frequently expect the bait-and-switch to happen and, quite seriously, feel as though they’re only really welcome if they’re useful at getting church things done.

What if congregations reframed Step 2 and sought to discover where young adults need the support of a warm community?

What might happen if your church asked questions like:

*How can we play a supporting role with young adults who feel compelled to protest injustice?*

*How might we resource our young adults' vision to seek to end homelessness in our community?*

*How do we provide support for community college students who have nowhere to park or might benefit from a free dinner as they run from work to night classes?*

*How might we promote equality by providing internet and computer access to those with limited resources?*

*How might we empower young adults' gap year experiences?*

*What mentoring can our community offer young adults who are starting a business, seeking a job, becoming a parent, opening an art studio, etc.?*

*What space can we offer for seminars young adults want to lead on racial reconciliation, interfaith dialogue, political debate, global citizenship, housing equality, or famine relief?*

Awareness of young adults' stories and openness to believing that they're seeking good news for their lives will inform the direction of your young adult ministry and fuel your creativity for serving them.

## ***Warmth admits limitations and inspires resources***

Let's be honest here: the list above may sound fantastical to you. Perhaps you're wondering, *Can we really start a young adult ministry like that? Shouldn't we just start slowly with a worship night, small groups, or something else?* There's nothing wrong with worship nights or small groups, but when they're disconnected from young adults' questions and values, they'll be taken as extracurricular events for young adults' already too-full lives.

Congregation members can feel frustrated when young adults don't show up and can even blame them for lack of commitment. Sometimes churches become bothered because they feel that a perceived absence of young adult ministry reveals the congregation's ineffectiveness. Either way, creative ministry doesn't force young adults into what your church currently offers. Instead, it aims to reimagine connections between what your congregation *has* with what young adults *seek*. You can encourage them by helping your church admit its limitations and see its assets.

Many leaders lament that they don't have enough resources, the right location, or the right people. In their minds, they think that there's a perfect church for young adults—and it's not theirs. But FYI's Growing Young research discovered that churches don't need to have a cool facility or large congregation to attract young adults.<sup>65</sup>

Let's burst that bubble. Everyone has limitations, but design thinking (a method for tackling complex problems) applied to our research cohorts showed us that limitations can often inspire the best creativity.<sup>66</sup>

*We don't have a budget, so how can we raise money?*

*We can't afford pizza, so what can we cook?*

*We can't get everyone downtown, so what if we started online?*

Limitations force churches to think in new ways that may surprise them with new creative possibilities that they never considered. Warm congregations admit limitations and are not embarrassed by them. We can all learn to work with what we have. And the gospel seems to insist that this is where God oftentimes can do the most work.<sup>67</sup>

Warmth opens us up to the resources we do have in our community. Churches must learn to recognize that they have more than they think they do. In fact, they may even have exactly what young adults want—if they're paying attention.

You may discover that young adults don't want a seminar on good business practices, they want to be mentored by the business people in your community. Yours may not need you to provide a program for them, perhaps they just need space on a weeknight to gather, tutor, or plan. While they don't mind "free food," they might actually want a lesson from some of the best cooks in your congregation.

Congregations are rich in experience, wisdom, and sometimes even resources if they're willing to share them in relationship with young adults. This is what warm communities discover and what young adults seek.

### *Warmth encourages creativity and unity*

One of the benefits of thinking creatively is that young adults and adults learn to work together. Oftentimes the fruit of creativity isn't a new idea, but new unity.

During one of our research cohort gatherings, teams brainstormed enthusiastically about ways they could serve young adults in their communities. One church leader got excited and explained his vision for an event that had the right food, the right music, and the right conversations. The team began to get excited because the senior leader was so animated.



At one point, another ministry leader asked one of the young adults on the team, “Would you attend this event?” The young adult flatly said, “No.” And the planning stopped. Thankfully the conversation didn’t stop, as the team began to ask the young woman about her response.

Because of their warm relationships, this young adult felt safe enough to share her honest opinions and the others felt trusted enough to not get offended. This interaction inspired deeper conversation about the needs of her peers and her hope for their church. This opened them up to see additional possibilities and invest their planning in a new direction. The best part wasn’t coming up with a more effective idea, it was becoming a more unified team.

I hope this chapter inspires you with the great news that young adults are searching for ways to faithfully follow Jesus *with* your congregation. They may approach you cautiously because they don’t want another “bait and

switch” experience. But they seek faith communities who encourage them to bring their authentic selves, express their honest opinions, and help them take faithful next steps. Creative young adult ministry boldly accompanies young adults in their search for reliable, Jesus-centered narratives. Out of these efforts, young adults may find more than their next steps—they just might find true community willing to walk with them.

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*Because of their warm relationships, this young adult felt safe enough to share her honest opinions and leaders felt trusted enough to not get offended.*

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## YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

Creative young adult ministry sets you free from the pressure of thinking you need to do more with less or that you have to do it all. Young adults already signal where they need your help, so your most creative energy should be directed toward helping them follow Jesus into their emerging lives and trust warm communities where they can grow.

***For you.*** How might you use some of your time to foster conversations with young adults that help them explore current and Jesus-centered narratives? Which young adults should you start with?

***For young adults.*** What's one concern or need young adults have that your church might consider supporting? How might you work with them to describe it and share it?

***For your congregation.*** While your church may feel like it has some limitations, why not gather some adults in your church and brainstorm what your church and young adults do have? Compile a list and pray together, asking God how you might use your resources to serve young adults.

## CHAPTER 05

# COURAGEOUS YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

Both Christian theology and faith development research suggest that spiritual journeys are never solo endeavors. They are always connected with relationships. In other words, we need young adults in our congregations because all of our faith journeys depend on the diverse expressions in our community: age, race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, life experiences, languages, vocations, marital statuses, political preferences, spiritual gifts, and more. All of these parts make the body of Christ more complete.<sup>68</sup>

But just because theologically we're meant to follow Jesus together doesn't mean it's easy.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable expressions of gospel witness is faithful members of the church community courageously trying to live their lives together for each other and for their neighbors. It's hard, and some might like to erase a category or two on the list above, but maybe that's the point.

Living the gospel together requires courage.

Young adult ministry leaders from our research cohorts reflected on the challenges of being in community together. Helen shared, "It's one thing for our church to say young adults are important, but then not do anything to make ministry with them happen. We realized how inflexible we were. How trapped we were in doing the same things. You need to step out of what's familiar if you want to serve young adults."

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*Living the gospel together  
requires courage.*

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Similarly, Zoe said what surprised her was the way her church thought young adults would help reshape the congregation. But the church discovered that most didn't care about being on committees as much as doing purposeful justice work beyond the church walls. The change young adults longed for happened too slowly within churches.

Helen and Zoe's stories don't equate to bad news. Unless congregations intentionally try to connect with young adults, they'll never really discover the surprises, sticking points, or misunderstandings under the surface. It's when we bump into one other that we're faced with the opportunity to respond and move forward. Churches can channel courage by prioritizing young adults everywhere and committing to keychain leadership.

## **ANTICIPATE RELATIONAL HURDLES**

Courageous young adult ministry starts by anticipating that hurdles will arise when you seek to live your faith journeys together. Given the uniqueness of the young adult stage, both congregations and young adults must be open to new possibilities and anticipate a few challenges along the way. These hurdles often have less to do with programming and more to do with the perspectives people hold. It takes openness to discern the difference.

You can clear three hurdles that tend to zap courage by defining the relationship between young adults and your church, overcoming a scarcity mindset, and accepting that young adult ministry will transform you, too.

## *The hurdle of defining the relationship*

I've used a metaphor about young adults and churches that seems to resonate with both young and old. I ask them to recall a time in their lives when they had to have a "DTR"—a "define the relationship" moment. This conversation with a friend, a family member, or most likely a romantic interest is the tipping point in the relationship when both parties honestly articulate what the connection means to them and where they see the relationship going. It raises questions like:

*Are we in this together?*

*What do we call "us"?*

*Who are we together?*

*What do you need from me?*

*And what can I expect from you?*

DTRs become necessary when a relationship feels undefined or when one party has different expectations than the other.

While some discouraging statistics about young adults and church attendance do exist, most church leaders I meet care about young adults and most young adults who want to follow Jesus desire some sort of church connection. So where's the disconnect? Perhaps it's time for faith communities and young adults to define their relationship.

What if churches and young adults sought to answer similar questions, such as:

*Are we in this together?*

*What do you need from us?*

*And what can we expect from you?*

We've already explored the reality that most young adults don't leave or avoid church because they don't care about their spirituality. Rather, they don't know

where they fit, how they belong, or how the church sees them. Like any undefined relationship, a lack of clarity dissolves the connection.

Seriously, go have this DTR conversation with some young adults. You might be surprised how much they'll welcome it.

Take a risk by reaching out first. It might take multiple conversations to gain understanding and trust with each other, but connection starts with a first step. Here are some prompts to get you started:

*I know this might feel vulnerable, but would be you willing to share what you need or expect from our church?*

*What do you believe the church wants or expects from you?*

*Tell me about a time when you really felt like you belonged in our community. Was there a time when you felt like you didn't belong?*

*As part of our faith community, what do you care about and how might you help us be better?*

Talk about what's possible. Talk about what's challenging. The goal is not to instantly "solve the problem," but to intentionally dive into the honest conversations they need and want to have.

## *The hurdle of scarcity*

Recently I spoke at a church that was eager for me to train them to serve young people better. The congregation filled the sanctuary, ready to hear what I might have to say. Halfway through my presentation, a hand went up and a senior saint said, “This is great and all, but what about us?” The nods of the silver-haired were unified and fervent.

Perhaps you’ve experienced something similar when you’ve suggested using church property for an event and met resistance. Maybe you proposed an initiative that was quickly shut down because “there’s no budget for it,” or suggested a new approach and received a cool response because it conflicts with another event or tradition.

Congregations point to logistical problems when, more likely, they’re holding on to a scarcity mentality. Like the honest comments from our older friends above, a scarcity mentality assumes that bringing focus to one group of people will mean others must lose something.

Church then becomes a battleground for budget, space, and, as I heard at my church presentation, attention—*What about us?* Young adult ministry leaders can show congregations that everyone wins when we serve young people. It takes courage because this approach requires those in congregations to let go rather than hold on. But here’s hopeful news: Growing Young research confirms that when faith communities focus their attention on young people, the whole congregation benefits from more energy, connection, and care.

A simple way to bridge the scarcity mentality of “us” and “them” is to tell older adults about how young adults have appreciated or benefitted from their efforts.

*Edwin really felt encouraged by your advice...*

*Tanya loved spending time with you...*

*Davis took your advice and is working toward a goal...*

*Juanita felt supported when you sent her that note...*

We all need these stories to remind us that scarcity is the opposite of life in God’s kingdom. And Jesus says when we give our lives away, we actually find them.<sup>69</sup>

### ***The hurdles of distance and contagiousness***

Perhaps you’ve felt the pressure to “recruit” young adults or explain why they don’t show up at church functions. Maybe you’ve noticed that these questions usually focus on young adults: their behaviors, priorities, or absence. What’s interesting is that I rarely hear congregants start by asking questions about themselves, such as: *Are we hospitable? Have we created barriers that keep young people from showing up? Might our priorities be boxing young adults out?*

It’s worth observing that when directing attention toward young adults, congregations often spend more time trying to change young adults than considering that they may need to change themselves. I’ve talked with genuinely concerned church leaders who are frustrated because they’ve “given young adults everything” like meeting space, funding for retreats, or equipment, but young



adults still haven't responded. I try to gently ask these leaders: *Have you and your congregation given...yourselves?*

This is a harder question to answer because it gets to a real challenge as to why congregations and young adults may struggle to find connection: faith, doubt, and struggle are contagious.

When people profess and confess their faith, doubt assumptions, question tradition, or offer alternatives, every relationship is impacted. Now everyone in a young adult's orbit must face new topics, address alternative views, consider changing beliefs, or reorient lifestyles. Contagious faith and doubt can raise anxiety, force unwanted conversations, and inspire people to reflect on their own lives—which can certainly be a scary endeavor!<sup>70</sup> Is young adult ministry courageous? You bet it is.

The real challenge you might be sensing with young adult ministry is that the work you do with young adults invites everyone to reflect on their faith communities and journeys.

Hurdles are rarely about the building, the budget, or the schedule.

They're more likely about if congregations are courageous enough to truly be the church *together*.

Which means changing together—all of us, not just young adults.

The great news is that courageous congregations are what young adults are searching for. They want communities who take them seriously, consider their ideas and support some of them, mentor them with wisdom, mutually grow, and seek to make a difference together. That's why young adult ministry isn't just *for* young adults, it's *with* them.

Somehow we must remind our congregations that “wanting young adults” means “wanting to change ourselves.” As you encounter church members who are confused, frustrated, and even anxious, offer opportunities to self-reflect before they default to critiquing:

*Why do you think your concern is so troubling to you?*

*Might our young adults’ perspectives have any merit?*

*How do you think we could learn together as a community?*

*Do you think there’s another interpretation than the one you’ve just offered?*

## **YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY *WITH* YOUNG ADULTS**

Don’t forget—we’re doing ministry *with* young adults, not merely *for* them. Overcoming the hurdles described above is half the challenge. The other half requires courageous commitment to what Growing Young research describes as prioritizing young adults everywhere and committing to keychain leadership.

### ***Courageous young adult ministry prioritizes young adults everywhere***

We’ve learned that when churches prioritize young people, everyone benefits. By prioritizing young adults everywhere, congregations offer a “tangible, institutional commitment to allocate resources and attention—not only for specific youth or young adults programming, but also across the life of the congregation.”<sup>71</sup>

While this commitment may sound overwhelming, prioritizing young adults everywhere starts simply: considering their perspectives anywhere that young adults might potentially connect with your church. It starts with questions like these:

*What are the implications for young adults when we only offer a 9 am—or even a 10 am—service?*

*What assumptions do we make about young adults when we ask them to volunteer and how do they feel about being asked?*

*Do our sermon topics and illustrations acknowledge young adults' lives? Do we use them as good examples or bad examples?*

*Do we know how our college students are faring away from home?*

*Do young adult couples feel supported as they venture out in their first years together?*

*How are our families who have young adults doing?*

*When church decisions are made, have we asked any young adults about their perspectives?*

Prioritizing young adults doesn't mean they always get their way, but it does mean that congregations work hard to not miss or ignore them either. Churches eager to invest in the next generation don't have to rush to start new initiatives or change anything as much as commit to receiving and considering young adults' ideas, feedback, and perspectives.

When young adults are prioritized everywhere, young adult ministry ceases to be an island, young adults are not viewed as competitors to resources, and generations start making authentic connections. This is a great start.

To make anything a priority, however, requires someone to keep the value in front of the congregation. You can play this role by consistently raising questions like, *Do you think young adults have any insights here? I wonder what young adults would think about that?* And you can affirm your church when they exhibit this priority by saying, *Thanks for raising that topic on Sunday; it really connected with young adults* or *Let me tell you a story about a young person in our congregation doing some cool things for Jesus.*

Kenneth, a young adult ministry leader, shared this story about his church:

*“Due to current events surrounding racial injustice, many of our young adults felt disillusioned about the church and their lack of support for them as they experienced and witnessed so much pain, trauma, disappointment, marginalization, and injustice. We encouraged a group of them to meet up with another group of older adults who were reading about racialized trauma and sharing their own experiences.*

*Many of our young adults were thankful for the fact that mental health was even given significance within their church. They also experienced peace and listened to the older congregational members speak about their experiences and talk about their own healing.*

*What we found most healing for ourselves and for our view of the greater church was to see an older congregation of varying ethnicities care about justice. This affirmed our purpose, our identity as believers, and our place of belonging within the church.”*

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KENNETH, YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY LEADER

You, ministry leader, can activate courage by prioritizing young adults everywhere simply through asking relevant questions, telling great stories like these, and encouraging your congregation to keep going.

### ***Courageous young adult ministry activates keychain leadership through young adults' grassroots efforts***

*What if...?*

For some leaders, these two words can be some of the most unsettling to hear. After all, many already feel pressure to come up with great ideas and plans. The pandemic hasn't helped, turning ministry leaders' most seasoned instincts upside down. If you're already feeling disoriented and frustrated, one more "what if" suggestion can sound like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Our Growing Young research noted that churches who support young adults commit to keychain leadership. When giving a teenager the keys to the car, a seasoned driver signals to a new driver that they're ready and that they're trusted. Keychain leadership "hands over the keys" in ministry by equipping, supporting, and empowering young people to lead through their interests, talents, and capacities.

In much of FYI's training, we talk about keychain leadership with teenagers and how churches can be great spaces to invite teenagers to serve and volunteer. For many teenagers, this may be the first time that they're given responsibility or encouraged to exercise their gifts. The church can serve as a safe and supportive place for teenagers to try, fail, learn, and try again.

But keychain leadership for young adults is, and must be, different. It requires more attention from church leaders and more courage.

I was speaking at a denominational gathering about young adult lives, faith, and ministry. During the Q&A portion, a number of denominational leaders and pastors asked me questions about young adults and commented on what their churches

were doing successfully. However, I realized that the real conversation happened after my presentation, during the break. I was quickly surrounded by young adults in leadership roles who told me:



*You're describing our lives.*

*I thought there was something wrong with me, but now I see that my faith and doubt journey is normal, even expected.*

*We love our denomination, but our leadership doesn't really see us or know us.*

*They think that because we're here we'll just do what they ask to keep the denomination alive.*

*We have ideas for ministry that matter to our generation. We have questions about topics that can't wait. But no one's listening and we just don't know how long we can hang on.*

*What do we do?*



This corner conversation transitioned into a rich, two-hour lunch where they shared deeply. I was inspired by these young adults, who desperately sought to remain committed to their beloved denomination and churches, yet who also felt deeply troubled by the lack of support they experienced.

Some leaders might have thought that they were implementing keychain leadership because these young adults were in leadership positions. But keychain leadership for young adults actually means recognizing them as career-focused,

cause-oriented, relationally selective, and bearing a burden of urgency for their friends and communities. They have limited time and resources and will use them judiciously. They have options and will choose the path of progress over resistance every time.

Keychain leadership requires churches to courageously redirect their position and power to help activate young adults' missional imaginations.

*What if...*

*...churches set aside funds for grassroots efforts young adults propose?*

*...businesspeople in the church helped young adults create business plans?*

*...churches supported young adults' grant writing, community organizing, or public health interests?*

*...these grassroots ideas failed, but young adults were still celebrated for trying?*

*And what if some of these ideas actually worked?*

Through my own church and the churches involved in our young adult ministry research, I've experienced young adults leading the way toward developing water purification organizations, starting homeless drop-in shelters for teenagers, launching tutoring programs, creating online faith communities, and erecting art installations.

They lead.

We support and follow.

Keychain leadership.

Discipleship.

Faith formation.

They need us. And we need them to be our eyes, ears, and hearts to some of the most pressing issues facing our world today. As leaders and faith communities, we don't have to solve these problems for young adults—we only need to fuel their visions with support, expertise, and empowerment. This is great keychain leadership.

Ministry *with* young adults takes courage. It asks churches to consider young adults in more of their decisions and challenges churches to lead us in directions that are new or unknown. This can be hard, scary work for everyone—but it starts to feel like the gospel, too.



## YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

**For you.** If courageous young adult ministry is about everyone growing, take a minute to reflect on how the faith journeys of the young adults you know are encouraging and stretching you.

**For young adults.** When it comes to keychain leadership, start by asking young adults where they see pain in the world around them and what they may want to do to make their neighborhood or world better. Another question I often ask is, *What's your gift to the world and how are you developing it?* Listen carefully and courageously.

**For your congregation.** Where can you encourage your congregation to invite young adults' input and perspectives? What's a story you can tell your congregation about ways young adults have experienced their love, support, or empowerment? What vision do your young adults have that might be worth funding and who in your congregation can mentor them?

## CHAPTER 06

# YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY LEADERS NOW

We've spent the majority of this book equipping ministry leaders to lead compassionately, creatively, and courageously in their ministries with young adults. You need young adult ministry *now* because young adults need supportive congregations and your community needs faithing young adults.

Now I want to circle back to a particular group of young adult ministry leaders I mentioned in the introduction: those who identify as young adults themselves.

A lot of you fall into this category.

We see you.

Leading young adult ministry as a young adult brings great possibilities and great challenges. Through conversations with leaders like you, we've found that you seek guidance as you strive to pursue your vocational calling and your personal faith journey.

*If you're an older ministry leader, read this chapter closely, too. Many seasoned ministry leaders I've talked with eagerly want to improve the ways they support their young adult counterparts. I share your sentiment and, as an older leader myself, continually need to come back to some essential shifts that I'll share below.*

Young adults, the spirit of this chapter is to ensure that your compassionate, creative, and courageous work helps you and doesn't wreck you. At this point, you probably recognize that *young adult ministry now* requires something *different* from you. Note the emphasis: *different*, not *more*. You can't add more to your already filled-to-the-brim ministry life. Set yourself up now for the long game by making four important shifts.

## SHIFT FROM MODEL CHRISTIAN TO FAITHFUL SEEKER

We've explored the spiritual lives, quests, and journeys of young adults. Understanding faith as a *faithing* process makes room for your questions, doubts, and new beliefs and can be liberating from the fear that you've lost your faith or failed as disciples. Many, however, don't feel like permission is given to unpack your own faithing while in your ministry roles.

Once at a conference, I led a seminar for youth ministry leaders who were under the age of 35. The room was filled and I was excited to have some honest conversations about the experiences of younger, emerging leaders working mostly in church contexts. At one point, I asked the crowd to describe how their changing beliefs have shifted or affected their relationships with their leaders, churches, or ministries. Here's what they said:

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*Your soul is more important  
than your ministry,  
and the test of truly successful  
ministry is you growing  
into the person God has made  
you to be.*

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*Our contributions aren't welcome or don't seem to matter.  
It hurts that I don't feel like I can have open conversations about  
our faith journeys.*

*Our relationships with leaders are strained.*

*We feel anxious, dismissed, confused, lonely, overwhelmed, and  
alone.*

*We feel bad, like there's something wrong with us.*

*There's no room to be in the middle on a challenging topic.*

*I feel confined, unable to express my points of view.*

*I still feel treated like a kid.*

*Sometimes, I feel like an outsider in my own church.*



Perhaps you can relate to some of these sentiments. Young adults in ministry like you, committed to walking with others with their faith journeys, rarely have space to process their own faithing.

The comments above might also echo the pressure you feel to detach your ministry work from your spiritual life. Added stress from churches who expect you to be model Christians leaves little room for exploration, doubt, challenge, wonder, and growth.

And you're dying a little on the inside.

Young adults want a faith that can keep up with their increasingly complex worlds. Your own faithing needs relational trust, the benefit of the doubt, and supportive mentors. If you don't feel like you have these elements in place, chances are you're going to hit a spiritual wall.

So hear me clearly: you don't need to be the model Christian at the expense of your soul.

Make sure your soul keeps up as your ministry develops. Ask your faith community to support you in nurturing both. It's worth it to talk with your supervisor or senior pastor about your own spiritual growth and faithing. Often senior pastors just need to know how you're doing, and most want to support not only your work, but your spiritual life, as well.

You can also recruit your own trusted network to be a safe space for personal formation. Proactively seek out a mentor or spiritual director outside your church orbit. Find someone with whom you can be honest and is willing to walk with you through your faithing journey. Remember that this isn't extra—it's essential for you now and for your long-term vocation.

Whatever you do, don't hide, pretend, or try to cover up the challenges you're facing.

Your soul is more important than your ministry and the test of truly successful ministry is you growing into the person God has made you to be.

*So before we move on, let's pause right now.*

*Who is an older person, mentor, counselor, or spiritual director that you can trust with your Christian journey of faithing? Reach out to them. And if you have a hard time answering this question, that's okay. Now you know what to look for.*

*Remember that you can be a faithful follower of Jesus without feeling the pressure to live up to being a model Christian.*

## SHIFT YOUR ROLE FROM PROGRAM DIRECTOR TO MISSIONAL MATCHMAKER

We've already noted that many ministry leaders who invest in young adults either don't have a job description, add young adult ministry to an existing job description, or, by default, have to create their own job description. When accurate representation of the work you do is missing, you're susceptible to unrealistic expectations, impossible metrics, and the weight of more busy-work. Even volunteers deserve a job description, as it will give clarity and focus for the time you invest.

The full scope of your work must be identified in your job description. Acknowledge the time you spend on young adult ministry and *with* young adults. Now your work can escape the generic line item of "other duties" and identify your actual tasks and metrics. Once defined, you can point to your job description and not fall victim to what others think you ought to be doing.

For example, in addition to attendance, you may also want to measure the number of young adults you connect with, listen to, or resource every month. Accurate representation of your ministry will free you up to do what is best for young adults rather than worrying about staying employed or keeping your role.

The right job description lets you leverage what we've explored in this book: that the uniqueness of each young adult's life journey requires you to discern their hopes and challenges, their desires for mentoring, the resources they need for support, and their hunger for their community connection. Granted, you may need to guide adults and mentors as to who young adults are, what they're looking for, or how they might be of help. Perhaps taking them through Chapters 1 and 2 would be a great start.

So let's shift your job description. Whether your role is part of your job, part-time, full-time, or volunteer, the right description captures the work you're actually doing and the time it takes. Then, live into your role as the missional matchmaker who connects aspiring young adults with experienced adults in your community.

We asked dozens of young adult ministry leaders to send us their job descriptions and, from those, developed a template for you (you can find it in [Appendix 2](#)). Let this be your guide for a more intentional and fruitful role as young adult ministry leader.

## **SHIFT YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE FROM MESSIAH COMPLEX TO DISCERNMENT TEAM**

Whether you're flattered or terrified by the responsibility placed on you, a common default of young adult ministry leaders is to think that you have to do it all on your own. Even the perfect job description won't save you from overload if you feel like it's all up to you.

Perhaps you've tried working with volunteers to help you out. But recruitment of volunteers doesn't equate to sharing the ministry load. Some ministry leaders still do all the planning and work, only tapping volunteers to execute their plans. This isn't inspiring for your volunteers and is a sure-fire way to burn everyone out.

A messiah complex reinforces a message to your congregation that young adult ministry rises and falls on you. Inadvertently you're teaching your congregation to expect you to be the young adult problem solver—as well as the lightning rod for blame when things go wrong.

The antidote to messiah tendencies is developing a discernment team. This group's primary role is not to carry out your ideas, but to discern with you as you seek the best way to grow and develop the ministry.

Create a discernment team by inviting those you trust to offer helpful perspectives on how your faith community can serve its young adults. Since we do young adult ministry *with* young adults, recruit a team in which approximately half of the members are young adults and the other half are adults who care (e.g., elders, parents and stepparents, mentors, grandparents, etc.).

Your discernment team should work with you to carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully understand young adults in your community and determine the best ways your community can support them. Because one of the hardest parts of leading young adult ministry is discerning what you can and can't do, this team's input is vital. And because of the open-ended nature of young adult ministry, this group will help you sift through many options that must be prioritized. Together, your discernment team can help to weigh the possibilities, own decisions, honor generations, and share the load.

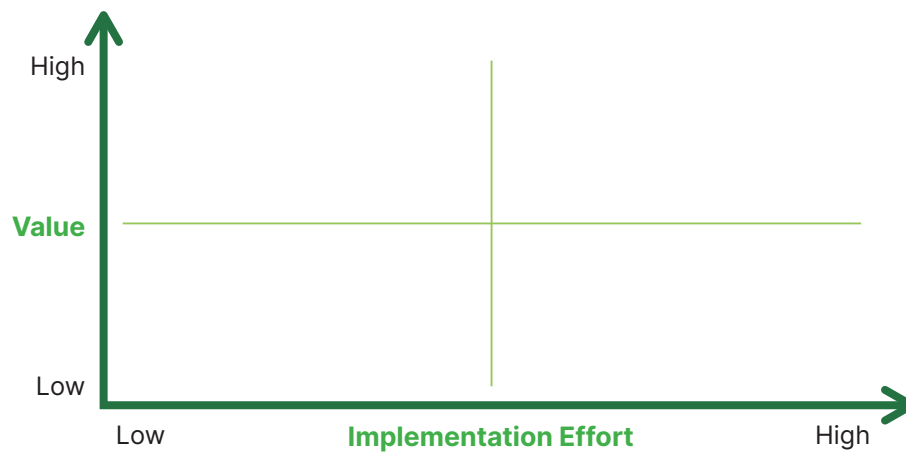
A helpful matrix we've tried with research teams evaluates priorities through an axis of *value* and *effort*.<sup>72</sup> Value asks you to rate how effective a strategy will be in serving a need. Just because it's cool, creative, or even easy doesn't mean a particular idea serves young adults well. Evaluating the value of a suggestion together helps you discern its potential effectiveness.

The effort axis invites you to determine how much work you and your team may need to invest to pull off a potential idea. It helps you count the cost of an idea to anticipate the work, expense, and time it might take. You may discern that the effort is worth it or that an idea needs more time to do well. Rely on the wisdom of your discernment team more than your own enthusiasm as you consider together.

Now, when you put value and effort on an axis, you can practically assess your options. Those ideas that have low value probably aren't worth pursuing. Those that have high value may have potential, but your options may have a range of costs from economical to expensive, with the amount you invest having a range of scope and impact.



## VALUE VS. EFFORT



Ministry decision-making is challenging because everyone holds their own perspectives on both value and effort. With a dedicated discernment team and a tool like the value-effort matrix above, you can have dialogue that fosters a shared decision-making process for your young adult ministry.

*Want to move from messiah complex to discernment team? Why not jot down some names of young adults and adults from your congregation who you can invite to be on your discernment team. You'll serve young adults better when you discern your work together.*

## SHIFT FROM TRYING TO TRYING AGAIN

“Whatever you decide, you just better get it right.”

These were some of the most terrifying words I’ve ever heard as a pastor. They came from an elder who was concerned about how we were navigating a controversial issue with our congregation.

My elder was anxious.

His anxiety made me anxious.

I almost gave up.

It’s hard to do ministry in environments that offer scant support and threats if you don’t “get it right.” Facing failure is a challenge for most leaders. Churches, characteristically, are risk-averse and are less inclined to take changes to try something new. Young adults, rattled by the pressure of perfection, often feel paralyzed to take risks for fear of failing in a time in life where there is little margin for mistakes.<sup>73</sup>

Everybody freezes.

And nothing happens.

Chances are your first attempts at young adult ministry won’t go as you hope. Your attempts will fail—some spectacularly! This might fuel insecurity and discourage you from trying again. But young adults need you to do exactly that: try again. What we’ve learned from our research on innovation and young adult ministries is that leaders need to redefine success and failure.

When success is equated as good and failure as bad, ministry remains short-sighted and unimaginative. Leaders who reframed success and failure as a result of “trying” discovered that all their efforts offered opportunities to learn, grow, and adjust. In other words, trying is what matters. Not trying becomes problematic.<sup>74</sup>

This is great news! You and your team are free to try—and try again. To step out again and again. To grow and then grow some more. Just like faith.

My hope is that you can help your church foster a climate of love, trust, and hope that welcomes young adults to share their opinions, offer solutions, and keep trying. But my hope for you is that you never stop trying, learning, and trying again.

With this mindset, you're connected with a long line of Jesus followers who continue to be captivated by the One who seems less concerned with your falling down and more committed to your getting up. Maybe this is why Jesus' frequent command in so many gospel scenes—"Don't be afraid"—still feels so timely today.<sup>75</sup> Remember that Jesus' call to not be afraid is also supported by another promise: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). He won't leave you to do ministry alone. Keep going.

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*Chances are your first attempts at young adult ministry won't go as you hope. This might fuel insecurity and discourage you from trying again. But young adults need you to do exactly that: try again.*

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## YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

We need young adult ministry now. We need young adult ministry leaders now.

Thank you for stepping into this space that often lacks definition, but is filled with imaginative horizons.

Instead of giving you reflection opportunities for yourself, young adults, and your congregation, I'll end with a reminder that I share with my graduate students:

every theory and theology is connected to a person. So as you reflect on concepts, theories, research, and ministry, keep young adults close to your heart and in your mind.

See them.

Say their names.

Advocate for their quests for identity, belonging, and purpose.

And accompany their faithing, too.

Young adult ministry now: it's possible because of people like you.

And in your own journey, may you experience God's grace and peace.

Even now.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 01

# LISTENING EXERCISE QUESTIONS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

A faithful attempt to listen well to young adults begins with a relatively simple premise: we can frame our ministry thinking by starting with young adults themselves. This means that before we launch any new programs *for* young adults in our communities, we must invest time *with* them, listening and empathizing with their stories and perspectives. This simple shift forces us to intentionally set aside our past ministry successes, expertise, and assumptions so that we can see and listen to young people in order to appreciate their lives and journeys afresh. The following questions are designed to prime your thinking about what you may want to ask your young adults. FYI has curated and tested these questions as we've worked with research cohorts and learned from their conversations with their young adults. We also know that your church context and the young adults you seek to serve are unique, so feel free to adjust, drop, or add questions you feel will help you best inspire conversations.

1. *What's something you really love doing?*
2. *How might your friends describe you? What do you think makes you "you"?*
3. *Where do you feel the most "at home" or connected with other people? Who are the people with whom you feel the most yourself?*
4. *If you could describe your life in 10 years, what do you see yourself doing? What will it take to get there, and what challenges do you think you'll need to overcome?*

5. *Can you describe some of the hardest or more challenging parts of your life? What is stressful, hard, or confusing to you? Why? (Follow-up question: How do you deal with that?)*
6. *What is your view of God these days? When you think about God, what do you think or feel?*
7. *What is the best part about being connected with your church community? What is it about your church that feels challenging or confusing? (Or if they're not connected to a church: "What prevents you from wanting to participate in a church community? What is it about participating in a church that feels challenging or confusing?")*
8. *How can our church be supporting you right now? Where do you think we're doing well, and in what ways are we missing it?*

## APPENDIX 02

# YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY LEADER JOB DESCRIPTION

We've learned from our conversations with young adult ministry leaders that the time they spend investing in young adults is often undefined and misunderstood. This creates two big problems. First, when your work with young adult ministry is undefined, unspoken expectations are placed on you and you run the risk of overextending yourself, often leading to burnout. Second, many young leaders understate what it takes to do young adult ministry because they don't want to look incompetent, so they misrepresent their workload—another easy way to burn out.

A clear job description can help provide you and your ministry leaders with a shared sense of how much time you *really* need to serve your young adults. Honest assessments ensure realistic expectations, clarify where the church may choose to invest its time in young adults, and reveal where more resources may be needed.

We followed up with young adult ministry leaders from our focus groups, asking them to send their job descriptions to us. Based on what they shared, we designed this straightforward worksheet to help you evaluate the time and resources that you dedicate to young adult ministry. Use these examples to help you frame your role and budget, and then talk it through with your pastor, supervisor, or mentor.

### *Role priorities*

This list gives you some categories to help you gauge your time. Note the two columns: budgeted hours and actual hours. Usually, it takes time to discern how you use your time. Consider reviewing this on a monthly basis until your budgeted time starts to mirror your actual time. Many leaders found it helpful to track these



categories in a spreadsheet each week rather than guessing at the end of each month. Note a few things:

1. Think of this instrument as a mirror that helps you see your work, rather than as a burden. The goal is to clarify your work so you receive better support.
2. In ministry, every month might look different. That's okay. Reflect on your budgeted and actual time and consider what seems about right and what might be taking more or less time. Ask yourself, *Where am I spending most of my time? Where do I need help? What am I missing that needs more attention?*
3. Observe your work over three to six months and then meet with your church leadership so that they can understand your young adult ministry workload. Up-front conversations will help your leaders understand what it really takes to do young adult ministry, what they can realistically expect of you, and how you might need more support.

DESCRIPTION	BUDGETED HOURS	ACTUAL HOURS
Young adult connections and meet-ups via in-person, video calls, phone calls, texts, emails, social media. These are planned and unplanned meetings for checking-in, discipleship, pastoral care.		
Preparation for teaching and leading discussions, developing curriculum.		
Development, training, and one-on-one coaching of interns, small group leaders, and volunteers.		
Coordination with other ministry leaders at the church to ensure young adults are supported after graduating from youth ministry.		
Pastoral care for young adults, parents, families, or relationships.		
Administration and communication (including emails, phone calls, and updates to young adults and the community).		
Program planning and logistics for gatherings, events, and retreats.		
Prayer, study, and seeking the counsel of a discernment team.		

### *Budget priorities*

While many young adult ministry leaders reported that they don't have much of a ministry budget, it's still helpful to track your needs and expenses to better educate your church. Plan your annual budget and then keep track of your expenses. Once you've done this, the next year will give you a better picture of your young adult ministry's needs, limitations, and aspirations. Remember that your budget isn't just a report—it can also communicate your values and your vision for young adult ministry.

DESCRIPTION	BUDGETED HOURS	ACTUAL HOURS
Coffee and meals (e.g., one-on-one relationship building with leaders and young adults, small group gatherings).		
Curriculum for discipleship of young adults and mentor or volunteer training.		
Events and retreats (e.g., spiritual retreats for young adults and leaders, life skills class for young-adult felt needs, scholarships for young adults who need financial support to participate).		
Outreach and justice (e.g., participating in city community development activities, supporting young adults' grassroots causes/innovative ideas for serving the community, transportation).		
Emergency fund for young adults (e.g., benevolence for financial hardships, counseling funds for mental health and family crises).		
Equipment (e.g., audio/visual, chairs, couches).		
Subscriptions (e.g., church management system, music).		
Professional development (e.g., books, trainings, and conferences to help you grow as a young adult ministry leader).		

## APPENDIX 03

# FYI RESEARCH INFORMING YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY NOW

### *Research projects*

*Young Adult Ministry Now* draws from four research projects, which are described in detail below. The first and the most central project was Ministry Innovations with Young Adults (MIYA). Next we surveyed churches, inquiring about their young adult ministries, and then followed up the survey with young adult ministry leader focus groups. All this work also builds on our nationwide Growing Young research.

### *Ministry Innovations with Young Adults (MIYA)*

This was a five-year project conducted between 2016-2021, generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. FYI was one of 12 academic research hubs participating in Lilly's Young Adult Initiative.<sup>76</sup> FYI's MIYA team engaged in peer learning throughout this period as each hub created and implemented its research projects. We are grateful to our colleagues and institutions throughout the country who stretched and inspired our work on MIYA.

The goal of MIYA was to reenergize congregational imaginations and capacities to support young adults' faith journeys. We sought to accomplish this through partnerships that co-created innovative practices with young adults to nurture faith and deepen community. This goal required that we truly experiment: forging relationships that yielded new ministry forms, thereby providing young people with the grace, love, and mission they seek.

Through MIYA, we consecutively hosted two 15-month cohorts and one two-year cohort, for a total of three cohorts over five years. These cohorts were designed to train, coach, and follow churches as they engaged young adults in their communities to develop responsive ministry initiatives. Every church that participated was comprised of four team members: a senior church leader, young adult ministry leader, and two young adults. Our methodology sought to ensure that half of the cohort was made up of young adults in order to balance power dynamics and make a committed effort to hear young adults' voices and perspectives.

Participating churches reported on their projects, progress, and engagement with young adults, allowing us to track and compile their challenges, learnings, and successes. We estimate that efforts from participating cohort churches resulted in engagement with over 2,000 young adults.

### ***Participating MIYA research churches***

In the three cohorts, a total of 42 churches participated. Of these, 37 completed their cohort experience. Five were unable to finish the project due to factors such as staffing changes or a change in church circumstances. The churches who completed their cohorts represented 15 denominations including Seventh Day Adventist (6), Nondenominational (6), United Methodist (4), Reformed Church in America (4), Wesleyan Church (2), Southern Baptist (2), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (2), Evangelical Free Church of America, Evangelical Covenant Church, United Pentecostal Churches of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Church of the Nazarene, Christian Reformed Church, and Christian and Missionary Alliance.

Churches ranged in size of active congregational participants, including approximately 99 or fewer (3), 100–249 (5), 250–499 (6), 500–999 (9), 1,000–2,999 (10), and over 3,000 (4). In terms of census regions of the United States, they were distributed among the Midwest (12), West (9), South (9), and Northeast (8). Regarding racial diversity of churches' young adults (based on reporting churches), 51 percent identified as "mostly White," 8 percent as "mostly Black or African American," and 41 percent as "multiracial or multiethnic" (including Asian American, Latina/o and Armenian).

The following 37 churches participated in the MIYA research cohorts and completed at least one ministry experiment: Berkley Hills Community Church (Grand Rapids, MI), Blackhawk Church (Middleton, WI), Christ Armenian Church (Pasadena, CA), Christ City Church (Washington, DC), Cloverdale Seventh-day Adventist Church (Takoma Park, MD), College Wesleyan Church (Marion, IN), Common Ground Christian Church [Midtown] (Indianapolis, IN), Common Ground: A Covenant Church (Sacramento, CA), Community Lutheran Church (Rancho Santa Margarita, CA), Encounter Church (Kentwood, MI), Epicentre Church (Pasadena, CA), Faith Reformed Church (Zeeland, MI), First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley (Berkeley, CA), First Presbyterian Church [Spokane] (Spokane, WA), First United Methodist Church [Tulsa] (Tulsa, OK), First United Methodist Church Huntsville (Huntsville, TX), Getwell Church (Southaven, MS), Hope West Side (New York, NY), Loma Linda University Church (Loma Linda, CA), Meredith Drive Reformed Church (Des Moines, IA), Miami Temple Seventh-day Adventist Church (Miami, FL), Pentecostal Church of Christ (Cleveland, OH), Princeton Alliance Church (Plainsboro, NJ), Seneca Creek Community Church (Gaithersburg, MD), Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church (Takoma Park, MD), St. Luke's United Methodist Church (Indianapolis, IN), The Bridge (Huntsville, AL), The Church at Brook Hills (Birmingham, AL), The R.O.C.K. Church (Los Angeles, CA), The Village Church (Flower Mound, TX), Third Reformed Church (Pella, IA), Upper Room Church (Minneapolis, MN), Westminster Chapel (Bellevue, WA), Westminster United Methodist Church (Houston, TX), Wollaston Church of the Nazarene (Quincy, MA), Woodlawn Faith UMC (Alexandria, VA), and Younger Generation Church (Arlington, TX).

### ***Young adult ministry leader survey and focus groups***

From April 27 to May 10, 2021, FYI administered a small-scale survey to those who minister to young adults ages 23-29 in their congregation, receiving 98 responses. Respondents represented 30 denominations. The racial/ethnic makeup included: 52% mostly White, 19% mostly Asian, 18% multiracial or multiethnic, 4% mostly Black or African American, 2% mostly Latino/Hispanic, and 2% other. Of the respondents, 57% were male and 43% were female.

Respondents reported their churches' average size as 761, the median was 350, and 59% reported church sizes under 500. The average number of young adults they reported serving was 79, the median was 35, with 67% reporting serving 50 young adults or less.

After collecting and summarizing the surveys from young adult ministry leaders, we followed up with those leaders willing to participate in a 90-minute focus group. To honor their time, participants were compensated with Amazon gift cards. We hosted three focus groups of approximately nine leaders each. Focus groups were formed around the young adult ministry leader's role at their church. Focus group one consisted of youth ministry leaders—those who primarily work with teenagers, but have picked up young adult ministry responsibilities as they sought to continue to support their graduates into young adulthood. Focus group two was comprised of those who identified their role primarily as a young adult ministry leader. Focus group three included those who identified as a NextGen, family, associate, college, or discipleship pastor with responsibilities that included (but were broader than) the young adult age group. Recordings were made and notes were taken for each session and then coded for accuracy. We noted particular themes and developed composites of young adult ministry leaders from this work.

### *Growing Young research*

Our Growing Young research findings were captured through our Churches Engaging Young People (CEYP) Project, conducted from 2012-2015 by FYI at Fuller Theological Seminary and generously funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. The goal of the project was to understand how and why exemplary churches are effective at engaging teenagers and emerging adults.

This goal was accomplished through a nomination process that identified churches perceived to be exemplary. FYI then studied these congregations in three stages of research: the first stage consisted of quantitative online surveys of pastors and youth/young adult leaders, the second stage featured structured quantitative and qualitative phone interviews with parishioners, and the third focused on church site visits that utilized ethnographic research methods. A full explanation of the

research methods and procedures can be accessed in the appendices of *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*.<sup>77</sup> Since the research project, FYI has offered training and an instrument for churches called the Growing Young Assessment. Data from churches who take the survey continue to be compiled for further and current research.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Assumptions and limitations***

While the research team made every effort to ensure an academically rigorous process, no research project is without assumptions and limitations.

*Our context as researchers.* FYI is located within Fuller Theological Seminary, one of the most influential evangelical institutions and the largest multid denominational seminary. While Fuller identifies as evangelical, it serves students nationally and internationally who hold a diversity of denominational commitments and cultural backgrounds. We recognize that Fuller's location in Southern California provides unique opportunities and challenges for participating churches, as local churches may perceive working with FYI to be more accessible than those from other parts of the country. Further, our own social locations (e.g., our research team was predominantly White and highly educated, the author of this book is male, etc.) and ministry experiences have undoubtedly shaped our approaches and assessments. Diversity of the broader FYI team, our coaches, and advisory council members provided accountability and perspective to address possible bias.

In our research, the majority of participating churches had resources to employ either part-time or full-time ministry leaders who served as point leaders for their teams. While we worked to accommodate the schedules of young adults, many expressed the tension and sacrifice they had to make in order to participate in the projects or join cohorts as they often conflicted with work and school schedules. It reminded us of the sacrifice young adults make and the hurdles that exist for congregations and young adults to work together.

The feedback we collected throughout the three cohorts allowed us to make iterative adjustments with every cohort to contextualize innovation for various



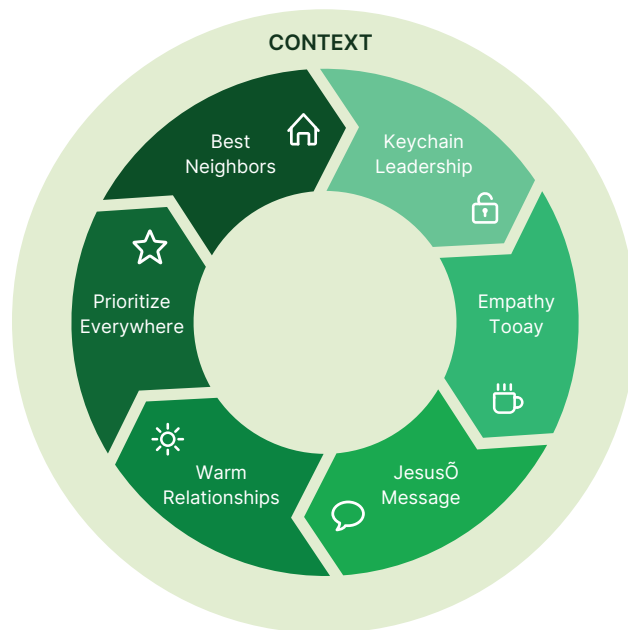
ministry contexts. The diversity of each consecutive cohort increased, reflecting our commitment to being more representative of the demographics of the United States.

Also, the pandemic, the rise in awareness of racial injustice, and political upheaval certainly created new challenges for churches and our research as we sought to achieve the project's goals while also acknowledging the new and added stress to churches, ministry leaders, and young adults. While we needed to make some strategic shifts in the ways we gathered, trained, and interacted, most churches remained committed to the process and saw the project as a peer support network during a season of tremendous turmoil.

## APPENDIX 04

# THE SIX CORE COMMITMENTS YOUR CHURCH NEEDS TO GROW YOUNG

### THE GROWING YOUNG WHEEL



**Unlock keychain leadership:** Instead of centralizing authority, empower others—especially young people.

**Empathize with today's young people:** Instead of judging or criticizing, step into the shoes of this generation.

**Take Jesus' message seriously:** Instead of asserting formulaic gospel claims, welcome young people into a Jesus-centered way of life.

**Fuel a warm community:** Instead of focusing on cool worship or programs, aim for warm peer and intergenerational friendships.

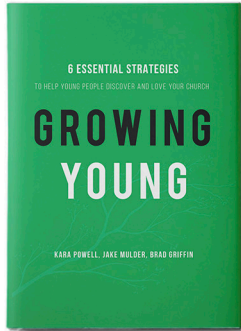
**Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere:** Instead of giving lip service to how much young people matter, look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource, and involve them in all facets of your congregation.

**Be the best neighbors:** Instead of condemning the world outside your walls, enable young people to neighbor well locally and globally.

**Steven Argue**, PhD (Michigan State University), is Associate Professor of Youth, Family, and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary and the Applied Research Strategist at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI). He has worked in multiple ministry contexts as a youth pastor, parachurch leader, pastoral team leader at Mars Hill Bible Church (Grand Rapids, MI), and has served on the board for the Association of Youth Ministry Educators. He researches, speaks, consults, and writes regularly on topics surrounding adolescence, emerging adulthood, faith, and spiritual struggle. He has co-authored three other books: *Sticky Faith Innovation: How Your Compassion, Creativity, and Courage Can Support Teenagers' Lasting Faith* (2021, Fuller Youth Institute); *Growing With: Every Parent's Guide to Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Thrive in Their Faith, Family, and Future* (2019, Baker); and *18 Plus: Parenting Your Emerging Adults* (2018, Orange, The reThink Group, Inc.). He is a contributor to *The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Contemporary Christianity in the United States* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), *Joy: A Guide for Youth Ministry* (Wesley's Foundery Books, 2020), and *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith* (Baker Academic, 2016). Steve and his wife, Jen, live in Southern California and love being parents to Kara, Lauren, and Elise and Chap.

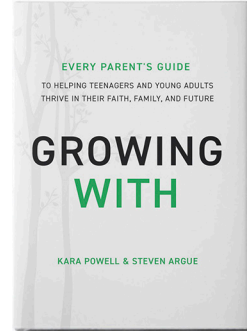
Twitter: [@stevenargue](https://twitter.com/stevenargue). Website: [www.stevenargue.com](http://www.stevenargue.com).

# MORE RESOURCES FROM FYI



## Help young people discover and love your church.

All churches grow old. But strategic churches are growing young. Packed with ideas based on groundbreaking research with over 250 of the nation's leading congregations, *Growing Young* shows ministry leaders how to position their churches to reach younger generations in a way that breathes life into the whole church.



## Growing up doesn't have to mean growing apart.

Filled with research and real-life stories from remarkable families, *Growing With* shows you how to close the family gap, giving parents courage to take the next faithful step on a mutual journey of intentional growth that trusts God to transform you all.



## Help the teenagers closest to you find Jesus' answers to their biggest questions of identity, belonging, and purpose.

Based on new landmark research, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager* offers leaders, mentors, and parents practical conversation and connection ideas to help teenagers answer their three biggest questions and reach their full potential.



## Bring your vision for young adult ministry to life.

Take the next step in your Growing Young journey with fresh insights on ministry with young adults from leading experts. Learn more about resources, coaching, and consultation for your ministry at [YoungAdultMinistryNow.com](http://YoungAdultMinistryNow.com).

# ENDNOTES

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- 66** Design thinking is a method of problem solving often used by tech companies. Interestingly, the process echoes what ministry would call *practical theology*. You can reference our innovation method by reading *Sticky Faith Innovation* by Argue and Roose.
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- 69** Matthew 16:25.
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- 71** Powell, Griffin, and Mulder, *Growing Young*, 201.
- 72** Argue and Roose, *Sticky Faith Innovation*.
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