

# ENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

The current generation of young adults – some 80 million strong, born since 1980 – generates a lot of interest and attention in virtually every sector of American life. Congregations are no exception. Many congregational leaders feel discouraged by the headlines and sound bites proclaiming this entire generation is exiting organized religion. Reading past the headlines, one may discover that things aren't quite as dire as all that.

There are some unique qualities about this generation when it comes to religious life and, in particular, affiliating with congregations. Some young adults who grew up in congregations have trouble claiming an adult faith or finding a place in congregational life after high school. Some drifted away when they found the faith of their youth didn't address their adult challenges. Many young adults were not raised in faith communities, so congregational life is unlikely to even be on their minds. We're learning that few young adults are attracted to congregational life the way previous generations were, and programs or strategies that worked in the past don't seem to be very effective in engaging this new generation.

The Center for Congregations talked with leaders of Indiana congregations who are successfully engaging this generation of young adults. We heard stories of vibrant ministry. We also learned there are no easy answers or turnkey programs. Each congregation is unique. Each young adult ministry is contextual. But themes emerged that we hope will be helpful to other congregations wanting to engage this generation of young adults. While we cannot generalize about these congregations religiously or theologically, we did notice some commonalities among Indiana congregations engaging young adults.

Such congregations are:

- Passionate about their faith
- Clear about their purpose and vision
- Well-led
- Committed to engaging young adults
- Dedicated to using social media strategically
- Grounded in tradition and flexible in practice



Here's what many of them told us:

## BE WHO YOU ARE

A watchword of this generation is “authenticity.” We heard it over and over. We noticed that flourishing congregations engaging young adults clearly express their deepest convictions. They know who they are. They are passionate about what they believe. Such congregations live their faith, explaining it in everyday language without buzzwords or lingo. Congregations seeking to engage young adults can begin by recapturing the essence of their faith and articulating it with clarity and enthusiasm.

## FAKE IT AND YOU WON'T MAKE IT

This generation of young adults has been targeted and micro-targeted by marketers since infancy. They know instinctively when they're being sold. Be clear on what your congregation is about, and make sure that clarity is communicated consistently online, in worship, and in relationships. Beware of flashy worship or the latest social media apps that are ends in themselves and don't point to your deepest authentic convictions.





people know they are welcome here.” That congregation attracts all generations. Another leader advised, “Don’t expect too much, especially on a first visit, but do follow up.” Specifically, don’t expect an immediate membership or financial commitment. Focus on welcome and hospitality toward all your guests, and let relationships and commitment grow.

### THE CONGREGATION HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

The congregation’s building may present barriers to the initial engagement of many younger adults. Housing all programs and activities in the building inadvertently sends a “you come to us” message, rather than conveying “we’re interested in you.” Congregations engaging young adults make it a priority to get off site. Such congregations offer opportunities in locations where young adults are comfortable — a one-time neighborhood service project, a discussion group in a pub or coffee shop, a free picnic or barbecue in a neighborhood park. Remember your online presence is also a critical part of your ministry outside the building. It needs to be current, well-done, and authentically representative. It is a tool for building relationships and engagement.

### GO DEEPER

Just because someone isn’t connected to a community of faith doesn’t mean he or she doesn’t think deeply about questions of meaning, purpose and spirituality. Many young adults have the impression that religious faith has little more to offer than generic advice to “be a good person.” Find ways to engage real-life, real-world topics and difficult questions from the perspective of your faith. Do make it personal. Don’t use jargon. One pastor said, “Young adults want to see my struggles and my scars, not just my Windsor knot tie.” Don’t just talk — be sure to listen. Most young adults want to share their own thoughts and hear from their peers, not just listen to an expert.

### DO SOMETHING

“Don’t talk about Christianity... show me Jesus,” said one young adult leader. Providing opportunities to put faith

### A LOT OF COFFEE

One successful young adult minister summed up the best strategy as “a lot of coffee.” Of course, it’s not always coffee, but engaging young adults is all about relationships. Listening, growing friendships, connecting young adults around shared interests and often food; these things represent the value of relationships. Congregational leaders talked about deep loneliness among young adults. “These isolated individuals need relationship and community, not programs,” said one leader. Relationships can be built over shared interests — books, film, running, cycling or cooking. “We look for relationships,” said one leader. “We want to host community.” Relationships with peers, relationships with mentors, relationships with clergy leaders, and an emphasis on intergenerational relationships were hallmarks of congregations engaging young adults.

### YOU’RE WELCOME

Congregations with significant young adult participation offer superb hospitality. Such congregations offer genuine, unconditional welcome. One pastor of a vibrant, growing congregation confessed, “We don’t do everything perfectly — maybe a B or B+ with most things — but



into action has greater impact than talking about faith. This generation tends to care a lot about “making a difference.” Invite young adults to join you in rolling up their sleeves to benefit the community. Of course, be prepared to make the connection to your faith when the opportunity arises, but lead with action.

### **WHO’S IN CHARGE HERE?**

We heard stories of dramatic change in congregations that intentionally invited young adults into leadership on the congregation’s governing board, in worship leadership, or in starting a new ministry. One congregation saw a big shift when they simply began including young adults in worship leadership that was traditionally reserved for older men. Another congregational leader said that inviting a young woman to serve on the deacon board was the single most important thing they did. But young adults don’t want to warm a chair at a committee meeting. Make sure you bring young people into leadership because you want to listen to them and follow their lead. In fact, congregations effectively engaging young adults invite them to build and lead ministries they’re passionate about, not just to help with existing programs. Whatever your congregation’s young adult ministry turns out to be, it will be most effective if it is planned and led by young adults in response to what they care about most.

### **INVEST TIME AND MONEY, AND CHANGE WHAT YOU MEASURE**

Engaging young adults requires sustained and strategic commitment of staff and volunteer time, as well as funds, leaders told us. But congregations investing human and financial resources in ministry with young adults are unlikely to see a traditional “return on investment.” In particular, those accustomed to measuring results in worship attendance and financial giving will need to rethink those standards. The motivation to engage young adults must simply be the joy of new friendships and sharing faith, not meeting the congregation’s needs for members or funds. Help current congregational members and leaders to understand what to expect.

## **What to do and what not to do**

### **DO**

- listen to young adults in your congregation and community and focus on building relationships.
- find ways to meet and engage young adults in the larger community, outside your congregation’s building.
- invite, welcome and include young adults as full participants and leaders in your congregation and accept whatever level of involvement an individual is comfortable with.
- assume limited (or nonexistent) knowledge of scripture, theology and liturgy.
- connect faith to daily life, especially topics of vocation, relationships, making a difference.
- start small and be flexible.
- have a good quality digital presence.

### **DON’T**

- expect long-term membership or significant financial support from young adults.
- use jargon or lingo.
- expect quick results.
- start programs without bringing young adults into the planning.





### START SMALL... AND DON'T QUIT

Congregations engaging young adults advise others to start small, in one-on-one conversations with the young adults you already know in the congregation, in the neighborhood, in your family. Focus on listening and engaging from a stance of curiosity and interest, not gaining members or starting a program. Then try things in response to what you hear, and invite your young adults to take the lead. Ultimately, stick with it and don't quit when some things don't work. Take the long view, and stay motivated by your genuine interest in young adults and your passion for your faith.

### RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

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For resources on this subject, you're encouraged to check out the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG) at <http://thecrg.org/>. Suggested CRG search terms: millennials, young adults, young adult ministry, generation, relationships.



For more resources on this topic

**CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE**

<http://thecrg.org/>

### QUESTIONS TO ASK

**Which** parts of this article resonate as strengths or opportunities for your congregation? How might you build on and develop those opportunities?

**Which** key points pose a challenge for your congregation? Why? How might you address those challenges?

**How** might you and other leaders in your congregation deepen the relationships you have with the young adults you already know?

**Who** else do you want to bring into the conversation about your congregation engaging young adults?

**What** is one small step you can take that will have the greatest impact on inviting young adults into the life and mission of your congregation?

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**Young Adult Engagement** is part of the Compass for Congregations series. It is intended to provide information and ideas about congregational learning. We hope you find this helpful in your work as a congregation.

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