

Beginning Young Adult Ministries

There are alarming statistics indicating that churches are not keeping post-high school young adults. This is a trend that crosses all denominations. Recognizing this reality causes church leaders to consider specific ministry to this age group.

Who are young adults?

Young adults are loosely defined as post-high school age individuals. This includes those who attend colleges and universities away from home as well as those who attend local colleges and universities. It also includes those who postpone or don't pursue further education and enter the workplace.

Because of a different focus, it may be wise to consider two groups as you develop ministry. That is, those who are under 25 years of age and working and/or involved in further education. The second group would be those who have completed the first stage of post-high school education and are entering the job market.

Long Term Planning

Even as you consider ministry to the young adults in your congregation, begin to plan for future ministries by investing in the lives of the children in the congregation. Children's Sunday School classes and other ministry gatherings need to focus on teaching the Bible, what we believe (doctrine), and a missional view. This needs to begin in the preschool years. Be sure you involve parents and provide resources to help them teach the Bible and doctrine and help them to become involved in ministry to others.

The Need

Statistics tell us that within five years following high school graduation, 75% of our youth group kids are no longer connected with a local church. Some of the church drop-out rate results from the lack of ministry for post-high school teens in many North American churches. We understand the need for guidance through high school years, but often forgot to continue that ministry as they begin to develop their own identity, determine future plans, and discover life as adults.

The transition from high school students to young adults is often filled with trial and error. Mentors and ministry gatherings may provide a safe place to talk and to receive input and encouragement.

Starting Young Adult Ministries

1. *Put together a group of key young adults from your congregation and allow them to begin dreaming about young adult ministries.* If there are no young adults available, ask parents of young adults who might be willing to invest time and energy into Young Adult Ministries.
2. *Start small, but very publicly.* New ministries need lots of visibility. This is especially true with young adults since they're a diverse group. Many are in school, living away from home, or living at home and working full-time. Simply keeping an accurate

mailing list of this age group is an undertaking. Publicity is vital to the success of the ministry.

Try something that gathers individuals with a former connection to the church. Examples of simple events are: youth group reunions or Sunday afternoon softball games.

3. *Easy access, thankful exits.* Make sure young adults feel they are welcome and that their involvement in worship and programs is intentional and appreciated.
4. *Welcome the short-term nature of their involvement.* Avoid activities which require weekly attendance. Instead, have each event, activity, or Bible study stand on its own. This way, if young adults only participate in one activity, they walk away feeling their entry back into the church was welcoming. This leaves the door open for their next entry, which may come even sooner.

New Connections

1. *Fellowship/Short-Term Commitments.* Time is the currency of the young adult culture. Many of our young adults are balancing school, work, and relationships which are time-consuming and rapidly changing. Their schedules are full of many demands. It is far better to focus on one-time events, week-long projects, or short-term (a month or two) commitments in which individuals can participate or serve and then go on to the next adventure.

2. *Relationship and Action.* A large part of young adult life is centered on questions such as, “Who am I to others?” and “What kind of person do I want to be in relationships which are important to me?” All aspects of relationship-building are important to this age group.

Secondly, young adults are doers. They are people who respond quickly to action. They would rather participate in service than talk about it. Relationships and action are key focuses for young adults. Tie these two focuses together by making sure there is always informal time for participants to connect with one another before and after an event or activity. Remember that opportunities for new experiences and active participation will be far more attractive than passive forms of involvement.

3. *A Passion for Making a Difference.* Young adults seize church opportunities that enable them to make a difference in the world. To put individuals in situations where their involvement really affects another person touches on the passion of ministry.

Ideas for Making Connections with Young Adults in Your Congregation

1. *Worship Life.* Be intentional about increasing the involvement and visibility of young adults in worship life. One of the perceptions which must be changed is that there are no (or few) people in our congregations who are young adults. Encourage your pastor, youth director, or worship and music coordinator to use

the gifts of young adults in all the regular aspects of worship life in your congregation. Include them as lesson readers, musicians, greeters, ushers, and communion servers. Too often young adults are overlooked in this central area of our life together.

2. *Service.* The passion to make a difference and build experiences is appealing to young adults. The themes of short-term commitments, actions, relationships, and making a difference all fit into the area of service. Short-term work projects which involve vocational skills, emergency response teams, food shelf projects, and serving food at a homeless shelter are examples of service which may appeal to this age group. Matching skills and interests are key in finding projects that will involve young adults.

Discover the vocational and educational interests of the young adults in your congregation and match those interests with tasks at the church. For example, if you have college-age students who are studying elementary education, ask them to work with Vacation Bible School or Sunday school as a way for them to build their experience working with kids. If there are young adults interested in outdoor recreation, include them in youth camping ministries. Youth ministry offers an array of possibilities for young adults to try their hand at leadership and mentoring experiences. Many young adults are skilled with computers and would be more than willing to work with staff and volunteers in computer projects and training. Most young adults are still exploring areas of possible vocations, and the church can provide them with service experiences that help them discover their vocation.

3. *Specific Programming for Young Adults.*
 - a. *Stay connected.* Find someone in your church to compile a list of Internet addresses of the young adults in your congregation. Some churches have their own web page, which is put together by their young adults. A weekly or monthly update letter about the activities of their home church is a welcome addition to the “E-mail” box of students away from home. Some youth workers write daily or weekly devotion for young adults and send that to all “E-mail” recipients.
 - b. *Summer discussion groups.* Many churches invite young people who are home for the summer (working long hours to earn as much money as possible for school) to weekly Bible study and discussion. These groups work best late at night and in the middle of the week since weekends and weekdays are usually filled with work commitments.
 - c. *Gathering events during the school breaks.* Most young adults have lost the structure of school and sports which kept them connected to local friends. Planning a Christmas party over Christmas break, an activity after Thanksgiving service, or a spring reunion in May after most of the colleges are out for the year are prime opportunities for one-time gathering events. The main attraction of these experiences is the chance to reconnect with peers.

Other Suggestions

1. Have a bulletin board where you can post their pictures, new mailing addresses, and email addresses so people can easily send them notes.
2. Have someone send them the church bulletins each month. Using the bulletins as a guide, ask them to continue praying for their home church.
3. Ask them for a short update and prayer concerns which can be put in the bulletin or used in prayer meetings.
4. Have someone or a group from the church periodically send care packages. If they are university or college students, they may appreciate a surprise around mid-term season.
5. If they are home for Christmas, Easter, or other breaks, think of ways to include them in the service or to acknowledge their presence. Allow them to see they are still needed.
6. Sit down and discuss how you can help them get connected with a church in their new location. You could offer to call ahead to a local church and give contact information.
7. Link young adults with a mentor. The young adults years can be filled with testing and trials. It may be helpful to have someone they can go to for advice, encouragement, or a listening ear. A mentor may also be a constant contact person in the midst of many changes.
8. Encourage them to plug into Christian organizations so they can form networks and friendships with other Christians.
9. Ask them how you may best serve them. Also, ask them to continue serving the local church even though they are living away.
10. Send them money. College students are graduating with increasing amounts of debt, and a little spending money might come in handy.

Other Things to Consider

1. This is not solely a youth ministry issue, rather it is a church issue. How do we retain people and how do we integrate our youth into the life of the church? Many would agree these two groups are not hostile to each other, rather they have not had opportunities to build relationships; they have been kept apart.
2. Christian Education Matters Greatly. We need to do a better job teaching children and youth about the importance of the church and the church family. We also need to allow space for people to doubt and differ with us. Many of the young adults expressed that they did not feel free to question or express that they were wrestling with issues of faith. They want to answer the questions concerning “why” we believe as much as “what” we believe.
3. We also may need to look at how we structure our youth programs. Are we teaching youth to be consumers, or are we teaching them that life is about serving others? Erwin McManus states, “Many people think the church is for them, when in reality, we are the church and we exist for the world.”
4. Churches should think of ways to prepare their high school youth for the transition.

Talk with them and raise the issues they will need to think about. You might consider creating a covenant with them, and having it recognised in a worship service. In this type of covenant, you might state five things the church will do to support these students as they graduate and transition. You would also ask them what they will covenant to do. Maybe it is to plug into a church within the first month of moving. Maybe it is to join an adult small group. Talk it over.

Leadership Characteristics

- Be Saved
- Be Spirit Filled
- An ability to communicate and model a holy and missional view of life.
- Have the ability to emotionally connect with the members.
- A basic understanding of the uniqueness of the *Young Adult* years.
- An ability to incorporate Biblical principles as it relates to “their world”.

Provide Opportunities for

- Fellowship
- Spiritual growth
- Genuine Ministry

Ministry to young adults offers people in a congregation the opportunity to invest in lives that will guide and direct the future of our world, country, and denomination. What an exciting opportunity!

This resource adapted from
Bryce E. Fox, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Millard Reed School of Religion
Trevecca Nazarene University