



Ministering to Young Adults

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Who is the young adult in your church?

Traditionally, the title of young adult was given to those who graduated from high school and who had not yet entered the young married group.

But, the young adults of our parishes are far more complex than that. They are the most mobile and diverse people in our congregations and communities. They are people between the ages of 18 and 30 who are students, workers, spouses, armed forces and Peace Corps personnel. In many cases they are struggling to discover their vocation or next move. They are full of life, are experiencing many transitions, and have incredible gifts to offer congregational life. Key words that describe this group are: *Transition, Discovery, Action-oriented, Exploring, and Visionary.*

This is also a group which is increasingly absent from our churches. For some, their pursuit of higher education pulls them away from both the church and home. Others feel they've graduated from the church youth program but aren't yet old enough for the adult ministries of the church. The result of being highly mobile and diverse is that many young adults in our churches remain a hidden resource and a ministry waiting to happen.

A starting place for any young adult ministry is to treat them as adults, not post-high school youth. For example, don't list them under parents' names in the church directory. Give them their own listing.

New Connections?

How can the church make some new connections with young adults? The answer to this question is as diverse as the group we are attempting to serve. A few basic ideas or ground rules for working with young adults may be helpful.

Short-term Commitments

Time is the currency of our 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. If our programs ask for year-long commitments (or even September to May commitments), we will only be reaching a few individuals. It is far better to focus on one-time events, week-long projects or short-term (month or two) commitments in which individuals can participate or serve and then go on to the next adventure.

Relationships and Action

Young adults are most interested in making connections with individuals and forming relationships. A large part of the young adult's 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.

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 needs to 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 in our churches.

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.* Here are some ideas of opportunities your church may try to specifically gather and care for young adults.

- a. *Stay connected.* Find someone in your church who is "into" computers and the Internet and have them compile a list of Internet addresses of the young adults in your congregation(s). Some churches have their own web page, which is put together by the young adults of their parish. 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 a daily/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 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.

Ways to Get Started in Young Adult Ministry

1. Put together a group of key young adults who are in your congregation and allow them the place to begin dreaming about young adult ministry in the church. If there are not young adults available, ask parents of young adult individuals who might be willing to invest time and energy in a ministry specifically for young adults.
2. Start small, but very public. New ministries need lots of visibility. This is especially true with young adults since they're such 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 key.

Try something which gathers together individuals who had a former connection with the church. Examples of simple events are: Confirmation reunions, youth trip 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.

Also, be careful to welcome the short-term nature of their involvement. Avoid activities which require weekly attendance for them to feel like full attendants. Instead, have each event, activity or Bible study stand on its own. This way, if young adults only participate in one activity, they'll walk away feeling that their entry back into the church was welcoming. That leaves the door open for their next entry, which may come even sooner.

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