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Meshed Ministry: Retaining Young Adults During their Complex Migration into Adulthood

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MESHED MINISTRY: RETAINING YOUNG ADULTS

DURING THEIR COMPLEX MIGRATION INTO ADULTHOOD

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2021

Portland Seminary
George Fox University
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL
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DMin Dissertation
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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 18, 2021
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership in the Emerging Culture.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Most studies indicate over two-thirds of churched young adults stop participating in church life one year after high school graduation. This generation represents one of the least churched generations in American history. After spending millions of dollars on elaborate children's and youth programs, churches experience young adult attrition. Young adults themselves seem ill prepared for this life stage. Churches who do not intentionally address the needs of young adults or view the exodus as inevitable miss the mandate to facilitate lifelong followers of Jesus.

In Section One, a review of developmental markers, faith stage development theory, and the uniqueness of the current young adult predicament reveals young adults are in a transitional stage of life, typically are between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, and are traversing the complex migration from adolescence to adulthood. These findings are integrated into an analysis of young adult church attrition. Young adult migration is accentuated by critical distancing from previous authority structures and establishing new authority sources. Situational and ideological factors catalyze their departure from church life. In Section Two, I analyzed alternate ways the Christian community has attempted to retain young adults. In Section Three, I offer a solution for young adult attrition called "Meshed Young Adult Ministry." Meshed ministry builds on four modalities: (1) adaptable engagement; (2) interlaced structures; (3) elastic shaping; and (4) breathable sanctuaries. These modalities represent modes of ministry rather than specific steps to implement. The artifact for this study, a website for church leaders, will include examples of practical ways to implement Meshed ministry as well as expand on the material covered

SECTION ONE:

THE PROBLEM

Jalen was active in church as a student attending summer camps, discipleship groups, and mission trips. After high school graduation, his church attendance waned after he joined the military. Following his discharge, marriage and a new business provided excuses for him not to go back to church. Jalen says he is a Christian. If you ask him if he attends church, his answer is no.

Sofia, a Bible belt high school student, came to church with her friends. She attended college two hundred miles from home. She never found a church "like her home church," so a campus ministry with new friends became her "church on campus." After graduation, returning to a traditional church without friends felt strange. About to turn thirty, she has not returned to church, but practices a hybrid of Christianity and eastern mysticism through yoga.

Kyle and Ryan grew up together at church. These best friends were standouts in children's and youth ministry often entrusted with peer leadership. Kyle considered going into full-time ministry. During college, Ryan revealed to Kyle he was a homosexual. Kyle's love for his friend caused him to question the church's beliefs. If Kyle loved Ryan, why couldn't the church love Ryan? Why didn't God love Ryan? Ryan no longer attends church, and Kyle is sporadic at best.

Kyles, Ryans, Jalens and Sofias litter the landscape of young adults today. All of us have family members and friends who have walked away from church and walked away from faith. Studies indicate over two-thirds of young adults stop participating in church during the years following high school, representing one of the least churched

generations in American history.[1] Researcher David Kinnaman states, "The ages eighteen to twenty-nine are the black hole of church attendance; this segment is missing in action from most congregations."[2] Churches spend millions of dollars building elaborate programs for children and youth, yet do not produce the outcome desired. These students become young adults who are disconnected from church and unprepared for young adulthood. Churches who do not intentionally address the needs of young adults or view the exodus as inevitable, miss the mandate to facilitate lifelong followers of Jesus.

It is not necessarily a lack of concern for young adults plaguing churches, but they are ignorant of the young adult situation or ill-equipped to do something. As church leaders, we answer the call to "shepherd" believers.[3] We are mandated to disciple *all* followers of Jesus Christ. Paul gave no age distinctions. What shepherd would turn out one of his sheep from the fold because it had reached a certain age?[4] We dare not shirk this responsibility as our young adults have been entrusted to us by God. We remain with them, guide them, and help them when they desire to wander.

We will be judged for how we help them acclimate to adulthood in the Kingdom of God.[5] This is not just an academic exercise or sociological trend worthy of investigation. These young adults are our children, grandchildren, brothers, and sisters. Their absence should haunt us. It should galvanize us to radically transform broken

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[1] Data supporting these claims is analyzed later in Section One: How Many are Leaving.

[2] David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 22.

[3] Paul used the word ποιμην translated "pastor." It also means shepherd.

[4] Ephesians 4:11. While I do not address evangelistic imperatives to reach young adults, many of the principles have evangelistic implications.

[5] Psalm 145:4; Joel 1:3.

spiritual formation practices and implement strategies of developing fully committed, lifelong followers of Jesus. It drives us to honest self-analysis and the creation of church environments conducive to vibrant young adult spirituality.

As a young adult pastor, this self-analysis led me to this research. This dissertation's purpose is to redress church attrition in my context. I have been a part of the Assemblies of God denomination my entire life. I minister at a 109-year-old church in the rural bible belt. Certainly, other parts of the United States (and abroad) will not share many of the same assumptions or cultural referents as we do in Arkansas; nevertheless, my analysis of young adult retention is rooted in this experience.[6] Despite my best efforts as a leader, I write this section with a heavy heart as Jalen, Sofia, Kyle, and Ryan are real people.[7] Involved in church during adolescence, they are no longer present as young adults. Back then, I spent time with them, prayed with them, and taught them. Today, I weep for them. We must do something; I must do something.

Understanding Young Adulthood

While children have been studied since the seventeenth century and adolescents and the elderly in the early part of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1970s that serious interest was given to the study of adulthood in general and young adulthood

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[6] Based on my work in young adult ministry in a myriad of settings, I believe the principles and claims presented here can be adapted and applied in multiple contexts. Contextual analysis is essential in any ministry and location.

[7] To support my claims, I use stories of young adults I have worked with over twenty-plus years of ministry. I have changed the names of these individuals. Some argue anecdotal stories may not be valid. However, I agree with Robert Burham who identified autoethnography, the use of personal stories and reflection for academic purposes, as valid, for it uses an individual's viewpoint as insight into the broader culture. For a detailed explanation and defense of autoethnography, I refer you to "Appendix A" in Robert Burham, "Restoring God: Re-Imagining the God of the Bible and Re-Enchanting our Neo-Secular Selves" (DMin diss., George Fox University, 2016).

specifically.[8] Previously undefined in sociological circles, young adulthood refers to the life stage representing the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Young adults exist in two different worlds simultaneously – adolescence and adulthood. Jeffrey Arnett prefers the title "Emerging Adulthood," as it best embodies the complexities of young adulthood and the implications of the transition.[9] Other labels associated with this stage of life include: "the twixter years," "extended adolescence," "twenty-somethings," "youthhood," or "young adults."[10]

Researchers often use age ranges to classify young adulthood. The complexity of today's young adult, however, requires more than a one-size-fits-all taxonomy. Understanding the complexities of young adulthood enables a church to build a robust ministry. To help do this, I will examine markers of young adulthood (age-delimiters, transitional life events, and generational characteristics), analyze the particular implications of faith stage development in young adults, and then describe the uniqueness of the contemporary North American situation.[11] From this, I arrive at the following conclusion about young adulthood: young adults are in a transitional stage of life,

[8] Fred R. Wilson, "Teaching Young Adults," in *The Christian Educators Handbook on Adult Education*, edited by Kenneth Gangel and James Wilhoit (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 191.

[9] Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

[10] While working in Student Development at a Christian university, we used the term "apprentice adults." While clunky and hardly memorable, I like the message it connotes.

[11] The unique markers are independently inadequate to defining young adulthood. Similar to medical biomarkers which use multiple indicators to diagnose and categorize, these markers work together to establish a stronger profile of our target group. A fascinating paper on biomarkers and the medical field can be found here: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3078627/. This excerpt illustrates why I chose markers: "The term "biomarker," a portmanteau of "biological marker," refers to a broad subcategory of medical signs – that is, objective indications of medical state observed from outside the patient – which can be measured accurately and reproducibly."

typically are between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, and are traversing the complex

migration from adolescence to adulthood.[12]

Age-Bracket Markers

Most researchers posit the start of young adulthood between the ages of sixteen

and eighteen and the end of young adulthood between ages twenty-two to thirty-five. The

American Library Association gives awards to Young Adult literature for books written

for "young adults ages twelve to eighteen."[13] MIT's young adult development project

defined young adulthood as eighteen to twenty-five.[14] My denomination, the Assemblies

of God, young adult ministry encompasses eighteen to thirty-five-year-olds. With such

ambiguity, Frederick Fay defined people ages eighteen to twenty-eight as "no longer

adolescents and not quite adults."[15] Age delimiters fail to be a simple solution for

defining young adulthood as current developmental factors defy age ranges.

Two competing developmental factors accentuate this ambiguity: early onset

puberty and delayed adolescence. According to Kristina Fiore, adolescence begins when

puberty begins (typically age ten) and continues to age twenty-four years old.[16] Many

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[12] I understand the limitations of a North American focus. As the problem I address is retention in North American churches, I focus attention here. *The Connected Generation* from Barna Research reveals international young adult trends.

[13] "YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults," American Library Association, February 4, 2008, http://www.ala.org/yalsa/nonfiction.

[14] A. Rae Simpson, "Changes in Young Adulthood," Young Adult Development Project, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, accessed April 11, 2017, https://hr.mit.edu/static/worklife/youngadult/changes.html.

[15] Frederick R. Fay, "Emerging Young Adult Spiritual Formation: A Developmental Approach for an Intergenerational Church" (DMin diss., George Fox University, 2015), 4.

[16] Kristina Fiore, "Kids Today Really Are Different," MedPage Today, EveryDay Health Group, April 25, 2012, www.medpagetoday.com/pediatrics/generalpediatrics/32350.

adolescents experience physical and emotional maturing earlier than previous times in history. The onset of puberty marked by menarche in girls dropped from age sixteen to somewhere between the ages of twelve and thirteen.[17] Others extend the adolescence past age eighteen to the ages of twenty-six to twenty-eight because of delayed emotional maturation.[18] MIT's young adult study identified the lengthening of young adulthood due to early onset of puberty and later delayed cultural expectations associated with financial independence and family formation."[19] The unique blend of early onset puberty and delayed adolescence challenges prescribed age delimiters. While disagreement on exact age ranges prevents definitive age ranges, they eliminate obvious non-young adults. For our discussion, I identify young adults as typically between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine.

<div align="center">Transitional Event Markers</div>

Young adulthood is a *stage of life* as much as it is an *age of life* marked by common transitional events or benchmarks. Daniel Levinson integrated chronology and stage development and identified the young adulthood years as life stage when personality and beliefs are shaped through the transitional event of separation from home

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[17] Susan Y. Euling, Sherry G. Selevan, Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, Niels E Skakkebaek, "Role of Environmental Factors in the Timing of Puberty," *Pediatrics* 121, S3 (February 2008): S167-S171, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-1813C.

[18] Tim Elmore and Andrew McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered: Facing Nine Hidden Challenges of the Most Anxious Population* (Atlanta: Poet Gardener Publishing, 2019), 19.

[19] A. Rae Simpson, "Changes in Young Adulthood," Young Adult Development Project, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, accessed April 11, 2017, https://hr.mit.edu/static/worklife/youngadult/changes.html.

and family.[20] Chuck Bomar, a young adult ministry practitioner, identified these life

events as standard benchmarks: finishing school, moving out of the home, being

financially independent, getting married, and having a child.[21] In 1960, seventy-seven

percent of women and sixty-five percent of men achieved Bormar's benchmarks by age

thirty. By 2000, this shifted to less than fifty percent of women and only thirty-three

percent of men.[22] Completing education as a rite of passage into adulthood no longer

applies. With the increase of online education and free local community colleges, more

students choose to stay home through non-traditional schooling options.[23] Some delay

college by taking "gap years." In 2019, The National Student Clearinghouse Research

Center reported falling enrollment rates for eight consecutive years.[24] While "older"

young adults sought higher education in greater numbers, enrollment trends have

reversed, making college enrollments and graduation no longer adequate fixed markers.

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[20] Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1978), 57. He calls this "early adult transition."

[21] Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart: Understanding the Mindset and Values of 18-25 Year Olds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 24.

[22] Bomar, *Worlds Apart,* 24.

[23] Grand Canyon and Liberty University claim over 100,000 students with a majority of these online. Lauren Abraham, "How Many Students Attend Grand Canyon University," April 27, 2016, https://www.gcu.edu/blog/gcu-experience/how-many-students-attend-grand-canyon-university. "Liberty University sees increase in new students enrolling in online degree programs," Liberty University, July 21, 2020, https://www.liberty.edu/news/2020/07/21/liberty-university-sees-increase-in-new-students-enrolling-in-online-degree-programs/.

[24] "Fall Enrollments Decline For 8th Consecutive Year," *National Student Clearinghouse*, December 16, 2019, https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/fall-enrollments-decline-for-8th-consecutive-year/. Key findings: Public four-year institutions' enrollment dropped by 97,426 students or 1.2%; Public two-year institutions declined by 77,092 students or 1.4%; Private nonprofit four-year institutions fell by 22,027 students or 0.6%; and Private for-profit four-year institutions decreased by 15,711 students or 2.1%.

Young adults increasingly sacrifice independence to stay connected to family. In 2016, approximately 66.6 million Americans lived in multigenerational households. For the first time in 130 years, young adults were more likely to live in their parents' home than on their own.[25] This lack of separation results in prolonged adolescence and longer parental dependence. For example, seventy-three percent of eighteen to twenty-five-year-olds have had their parents recently help them financially.[26] Marriage, another moment young adults leave home, has been delayed. The median age for a first marriage is now 28.0 for women and 29.8 for men, both almost six years later than in 1980.[27]

Parents contribute to a lack of independence through a phenomenon called "helicopter parents." Helicopter parents hover over young adults to assist them in achieving their dreams and minimizing life challenges.[28] Well intentioned helicopter parents unintentionally perpetuate adolescent dependence. For instance, Tim Elmore writes,

> Recently, I met with a human resources executive who informed me that six times in the last two months she had made a job offer to a young professional and heard these recent graduates reply, "Thank you, but now my parents need to interview you to make sure you are suitable boss for me.[29]

[25] A.W. Geiger, "16 Striking Findings From 2016," Fact Tank, Pew Research Center, December 21, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/21/16-striking-findings-from-2016/.

[26] Bomar, *Worlds Apart,* 48.

[27] "Estimated Median Age at First Marriage: 1890 to Present," U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, last modified October 10, 2019, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html.

[28] Brandon M. Pardekooper, *Millennial Leadership: Equipping Generations to Influence a New Millennium* (n.p.: IngramSpark, 2019), 65.

[29] Elmore and McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered,* 15. In a conversation with a Human Resource department of a hospital, I learned young adult job applicants often interviewed with their parents present. It was not received with enthusiasm.

Rather than resenting parents who are restrictive, many young adults invite this. Seventy-seven percent of Millennials regularly seek parental advice and eighty-eight percent say parents have a positive influence on them.[30] Young adults desire an active presence of parents in their lives.

The process of personality formation and familial separation is complicated.[31] Even if not universally applicable, marriage, childbearing, college education, and financial independence are typical young adult benchmarks. These, as well as other psycho-maturation processes, impact young adult development.[32] Achieving adulthood in America should be understood as progression through, rather than crossing of fixed thresholds.

Generational Markers

Sociologist Karl Mannheim theorized generations, people born during specific time periods in common geographical regions, are themselves a sociological construct.[33] They have shared experiences and influences (i.e., technological advancement, economic realities, historical events, and popular culture) resulting in similar behavioral

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[30] Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 19.

[31] Varda Konstam, *Emerging and Young Adulthood: Multiple Perspectives, Diverse Narratives* (New York: Springer, 2007), 2. Konstam states these as "Accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent."

[32] For a discussion of how these ideals impact the medical world, see https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3792649/. While not germane to this discussion per se, they support the premise young adulthood is not defined in simple terms.

[33] Chip Espinosza and Mick Ukleja, *Managing the Millennials: Discover the Core Competencies for Managing Today's Workforce* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 11.

characteristics. A review of the two generations associated with today's young adults –

Millennials and Generation Z – assists in understanding young adults.[34]

Millennials

Millennials are typically identified as individuals whose birth years range from

between 1984 and 1998.[35] Tim Elmore in *Generation iY* says, "Millennials are the most

eclectic and diverse in our nation's history, as well as the most protected and observed."[36]

Despite this eclectic diversity, generational trends are observable. *Millennial Leadership*

identifies the following characteristics of Millennials: confident, achievement focused,

team oriented, family oriented, and technology natives.[37] Thom and Jess Rainer's

describes them as hopeful, relational, learners, and looking less to religion.[38] Millennials

identify themselves as highly optimistic.[39] When asked to classify their generation,

millennials used these phrases: technology use, music and pop culture, liberal/tolerant,

smarter, and clothes.[40] Millennials represent the oldest group of young adults in the

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[34] For a discussion of generational studies and church ministry, see Gary McIntosh's *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church*; Paul Taylor's *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials and the Looming Generational Showdown*, and Tim Elmore's *Generation Z Unfiltered*.

[35] Barna Group, *The Connected Generation: How Christian Leaders around the World Can Strengthen Faith & Well-Being among 18-35-Year-Olds* (Ventura: Barna Group, 2019), 12.

[36] Tim Elmore, *Generation iY: Secrets to Connecting With Today's Teens & Young Adults in the Digital Age* (Atlanta: Poet Gardener Publishing, 2015), 9.

[37] Pardekooper, *Millennial Leadership,* 35-45.

[38] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials,* 16-22.

[39] Jan Ferri-Reed, "Millennials – Generation 'Screwed' or Generation 'Shrewd,'" *Journal for Quality and Participation* 36, no. 1 (April 2013): 22-23.

[40] Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me,* 37.

church today. Early trends of self-reliance and confidence have been shaken by world

events and their transition into adulthood. Millennials desire meaningful involvement

because they believe they have something to offer. They see their role as making the

world and themselves better. They believe, if allowed, they are capable of doing it. While

some disparage this group, I see in them the hopeful confidence of people who can bring

about needed change.

Generation Z

The group entering young adulthood is known as Generation Z. While premature

to articulate a complete profile of Generation Z, trends are being revealed. James White

in *Meet Generation Z* identifies this group as individuals born from 1995 to 2010 and it

constitutes 25.9% of the US population, making it the largest in America.[41] Researcher

Tim Elmore defines this group as:

> Social scientists vary on when Generation Z actually started. Some have them
> beginning as early as 1995. Others at 1997. Still others somewhere between 1999
> and 2002. As I examined the rationale behind each start date, I felt the strongest
> case could be made for the turn of the century: 2001. While I respect each
> perspective, when we pause and consider history, so much of it shifted after
> Y2K.[42]

Generation Z grew up in a post 9/11 American culture and has five distinguishing

characteristics: recession marked, Wi-Fi enabled, multiracial, sexually fluid, and post-

Christian.[43] White suggests, different from Millennials, Generation Z is being raised by

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[41] James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 37-38.

[42] Elmore and McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered,* 42. Note the cross over start dates of Gen Z and end dates of Millennials. It is too early to identify a fixed point. I agree with Elmore's analysis.

[43] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 39-49.

less involved parents.[44] Jean Twenge, author of *iGen*, believes Generation Z is breaking

from their pasts "socially, vocationally, spiritually, sexually, and emotionally."[45] In my

personal experience, parental involvement has stayed the same, but this group asserts

themselves more. They are moving out from under the helicopter.

Two years after White, Tim Elmore identified Generation Z as private, anxious,

restless, tech savvy, nurtured, entrepreneurial, and redemptive.[46] Elmore additionally

identified nine challenges Generation Z faces and how leaders should best assist

Generation Z with these challenges.[47] For Elmore, the maturation process of Generation

Z requires intentional leadership by mature influencers. Their access to so many inputs

during a low maturity state has created a vulnerable generation. While seemingly

negative, Elmore has high hopes for Generation Z if the right experiences facilitate their

maturation process.

White and Elmore forecast the future, opening themselves up to debate. Many in

Generation Z would reject their conclusions. I find their thoughts helpful in

understanding young adults. At this point in the analysis, many of the conclusions seem

conflicting or competing.[48] A generation asserting itself without proper guardrails is in a

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[44] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 52.

[45] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – And Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 139.

[46] Elmore and McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered,* 27-30. I find humor that Elmore, a boomer, created an acronym PARTNER to describe Generation Z. How very boomer of him.

[47] Elmore and McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered,* 53-55. Here I identify the challenges Elmore identifies and interact with his leadership strategies in Appendix B.

[48] Leonard Sweet in *Soul Tsunami* predicted this. He referred to this as "ringing twice." It is likely Sweet might now say everything rings three or four times.

precarious position. Generation Z is connected but lonely, privileged but anxious, diverse yet segregated, and more.

After Sarah's father died of cancer, she, her mom, and brother had a difficult journey emotionally and financially. Recently, Sarah met with me to discuss college. Typically, college conversations involve how much school costs and how little money the individual has. Sarah was different. She was assertive, savvy, and everything you hope for in a twenty-something-year-old woman. Through hard work, she had saved several thousand dollars for school, but she needed help with admission process. Despite her confidence, the college application process intimidated her. She wanted more than advice, she wanted me to tell her what to do. She epitomizes a generation of self-made, independent, and paralyzed young adults.

Faith Development of Young Adults

We have used markers to understand a young adult: age-brackets, transitional life events, and generational characteristics. These provide a helpful start to understand the faith practices, or lack thereof, of young adults. In this section, I will use James Fowler's analysis of faith stage development in young adults to further our understanding of young adulthood.

James Fowler, a leading figure in Christian developmental psychology, identified seven unique stages of life where individuals develop and practice faith.[49] For Fowler, faith is more than belief; it is the system of commitments, values, and images guiding a

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[49] Fowler is not the only faith development researcher. I chose Fowler's because I feel it is a proven baseline. Others include Mark Cannisert, David Levinson, Brendan Carmody, Alan Jamieson, and Sharon Parks. Parks breaks from many of Fowler's conclusions.

person's life. In *Becoming Adult Becoming Christian*, Fowler observes not all stages are related to age groups, but his findings are typical.[50] Fowler's developmental stages identify predictable, uniform ways of faith expression.

Fowler labels the transition from adolescence to adulthood as Stage Four: Individuative – Reflective faith. This stage is evidenced by critical distancing from external sources of authority structures developed in Stages Zero to Three such as parents and educators. During this period, the individual self becomes the source of authority, and the *executive ego* (desire to be oneself and choose one's path) emerges. Individuals establish boundaries between themselves and past influences positing authority internally. The individual's reliance on personal authority, Fowler's executive ego, enables a young adult to establish his or her own identity, beliefs, and spiritual practice.[51] Critical distancing takes place when one relocates authority away from established, external value systems to internal ones. While this sounds like a total abandonment of prior spiritual authority, the process begins with more a critical evaluation of beliefs and faith practice rather than wholesale abandonment.[52] A young adult desires to become their independent selves, but still be tethered to these influences in some way.

Young adults do not develop faith in a vacuum. Fay summarizes the impact of Fowler's theory: "Faith development theory creates ways to speak about belief in a pluralistic society without giving up a person's specific religious identity. It sees a

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[50] James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 45.

[51] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), 179.

[52] Carlton Johnstone, *Embedded Faith: The Faith Journeys of Young Adults within Church Communities* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 25.

person's faith convictions can change and still keep the integrity of his or her beliefs. It demonstrates our religious beliefs are socially as well as historically formed."[53] Despite the need to distance from previous authority structures, religious influences early in life are the building materials where new faith is constructed. Layering Fowler's *Stage Four – Individuative – Reflective faith* on top of the traditional markers creates a stronger base for understanding young adulthood.

<div align="center">Uniqueness of the Current Young Adult World</div>

While the above criteria address specific developmental markers of young adults, a deeper dive into the uniqueness of the current young adult predicament helps better understand young adults. Cultural trends are impermanent and prone to over obsession by church leaders, yet a picture of today's young adult would be incomplete without addressing specific societal realities unique to them. Young adults today live in an increasingly secular, smaller, self-segregated, and stressed world.

Their World is Secular

In 2012, the Pew Research survey indicated young adults are less likely to identify themselves with any religion. Fewer than six-in-ten Millennials identify with any branch of Christianity.[54] This research gave rise to the use of the title "nones" to describe people who choose "none" as their religious preference. Barna Research Group

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[53] Fay, "Emerging Young Adult Spiritual Formation," 46.

[54] "'Nones' on the Rise," Polling and Analysis, Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/.

concluded sixty-four percent of young adult "nones" were raised religious.[55] Secularity's

growth as a dominant force in young adult culture cannot be minimized.

James White identified three forces influencing post-Christian Western society:

secularization, privatization, and pluralization.[56] Secularization removes religious

expression as a dominant influence and replaces it with societal authority. Privatization is

the process of separating public and private spheres of life in relation to individual

spirituality. Pluralization is the result of competing faith ideologies being given equal

footing and viewed as equal or compatible with none exclusive. While White sees this as

separate forces, I think they work together as one integrated, catalyzing force of

secularization. I believe nothing has made more impact on the faith practice of young

adults than secularism.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and James K. A. Smith's *How (Not) to Be Secular*

provide a strong framework for understanding the impact of secularity on young adults

and offer glimmers of hope.[57] They reframe security's historical development and

expression. Smith is an unabashed evangelist for Taylor's work and calls its contribution

"an insightful and incisive account of our globalized, cosmopolitan, pluralistic present …

his account of our "cross-pressured" situation – suspended between the malaise of

immanence and the memory of transcendence – names and explains vague rumblings off

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[55] Barna Group, "5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church," Millennials and Generations, Barna Group, September 17, 2013, https://www.barna.com/research/5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church/.

[56] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 28-29.

[57] Charles Taylor's 800-page tome on secularity is too lengthy to adequately address here. Smith's work is a primer on Taylor. Rather than a detailed analysis, I address portions of particular interest in the study of young adult faith practice and secularity.

in the background of experience for which we lack words."[58] They argue secularity's impact is more nuanced than the absence of religious expression in society. It represents a singular metaphysical ethos unparalleled in world history with surprising repercussions.

Taylor points out the transition from pre-modern to modern worldview as one where once "it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believers, is one human possibility among others."[59] Secularity is not just an option, it is presupposed in western culture. Modern secularists believe they can achieve significance without transcendence (reliance upon a divine agent). Many view this as the natural evolution of thought as a society progresses via scientific discovery and humanistic advancement.

Taylor rejects the idea that society's religious belief naturally diminishes as it moves through modernity. In his construct, religious belief expresses itself differently within whatever dominant worldview is present. In relationship to secularism, religious expression should be seen as *conditions* of belief as opposed to *expression* of belief. As such, secularity expresses itself differently in the dominant worldview as well. His threefold taxonomy of "secular" (secular-1, secular-2, and secular-3) explains how secularity has changed over time and ultimately became, in and of itself, the dominant world view.[60]

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[58] James K. A. Smith, *How Not to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 2014), *x.*

[59] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

[60] These designations are represented in their original work as secular1, secular2, and secular3. I have chosen to represent them as secular-1, secular-2, and secular-3 to assist reader comprehension.

Pre-modern secularity, which Taylor labels secular-1, was not areligious or anti-religious, but the opposite of sacred. Secular-1 was natural, non-divine, earthly activities. The secular was seen; the sacred was everything else. Atheism was essentially unthinkable. The world was "enchanted" meaning society was grounded in a higher reality and filled with spiritual forces.[61]

During the modern era, the term secular (Taylor labels secular-2) began to refer to a "nonsectarian, neutral and *a*religious space."[62] Typically, when people speak of secularism, they mean this. Secular-2 is characterized by removing obstacles of unbelief through disembodying religion (and Christianity in particular) through subtracting supernatural stories and explanations, or "excarnation."[63] This "disenchanting of the world" results in a secular public sphere free from religious impediments to modern science and technology.

Secular-2's excarnation resulted in "Exclusive Humanism," a worldview where humanity achieves significance with a reliance upon self rather than the transcendent. Taylor calls society's self-perception of practice and function, social imaginaries. A post-Christian imaginary exists today because the social imaginary shifted its basis from religious views to secular ones.[64] Social imaginaries shifts like this create tension in society and an individual.

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[61] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 25.

[62] Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 21.

[63] Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 45.

[64] Garrick C. Roegner, "Monastic Missional Pilgrim Communities in Liquid Modern Spain" (DMin diss., George Fox University, 2015), 5.

Taylor and Smith see the rise and development of our current predicament as a new expression of secularity, identified as secular-3. Secular-3 is not characterized by an age of disbelief, but rather, believing differently than previous time periods. While White identified this as a separate force (privatization), Taylor posits this as a result of secular development. He refers to this, not as privatization, but as immanentization. Privatization describes the individualized practice of faith. Immanentization refers to the finding of meaning and fullness through a self-sufficient, enclosed universe absent the need for transcendence.[65] Individuals create their own personal "immanent frame" to arrive at meaningful existence. What I do in my own frame is private and acceptable as long as it does not impact your frame. The achievement of disengaging religiousness from the public square is lauded and reinforced.

In societal development, one would assume belief and religious expression are no longer needed as secularism, and more specifically secular-2, purged religious expression. However, transcendence and immanence collide. While faith and spiritual practice are unthinkable to a modern secularist, so is the resulting narrative of metaphysical abandonment and despair. While secularity has made great strides, it has not achieved all the goals of the secular-2, specifically the elimination of belief.[66] Thus giving rise to a new kind of secular expression, secular-3.

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[65] Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 141.

[66] This is not to dismiss the impact of 21st-century secularism called New Atheism. Led by writers Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, and Christopher Hitchens, the New Atheists believe there is no supernatural or divine reality of any kind. Epistemologically speaking, they assert religious belief is irrational, unprovable, and harms society. While New Atheist positions are not all that "new," their caustic and inflammatory positions create interest and young adults have embraced their approach. In my work with college students, their influence has grown significantly over the last decade. New Atheist reasoning plays into the developmental influences of critical distancing during young adulthood. New Atheism's attack on religious practice as immoral has influenced the decline of young adult church attendance. Recently, the parents of a college freshman tearfully met with me. This family has deep Christian heritage

While secularists do not need transcendence or belief, some do not deny its practical possibility. Taylor writes, "Secularity is a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike."[67] Secularism's mission to remove transcendence (Nietzsche's the death of God) has not made faith's presence go away. God, though dismissed from society, "haunts" (Smith calls him a ghost) the secularist. Religious belief can be accepted, not because of intrinsic veracity, but because plausibility of belief is necessary. The result is an abundance of plausible beliefs, both religious and non-religious, that lead to a cross-pressured system. Under this cross-pressure, doubt and belief live in tandem. Doubters (secularists) are tempted to believe, while believers are tempted to doubt.

Young adults find themselves in the precarious position of critically distancing (Fowler's Stage Four) during a time period of secularity's immanentization (Charles Taylor). In a young adult's immanent frame, meaning and significance are created in a self-sufficient enclosure.[68] The emergence of ego and identity differentiation undergo exponential acceleration in this environment, catalyzing separation from established religion. At the same time, faith's ghost haunts them. In Taylor's words, "There is a strong sense of deficit in a world where people used to feel a presence, and were accustomed to its support; often they couldn't help feeling the lack of this support as

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and multiple members are ministers. After one semester in college, their child informed them he had become an atheist after reading Dawkins. In his words, "Dawkins gives me ways to express what I've been feeling for years. It has given me the courage to finally say what I think."

[67] Colleen Batchelder, "Exvangelical: Why Millennials and Generation Z are Leaving the Constraints of White Evangelicalism" (DMin diss., George Fox University, 2020), 120.

[68] Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 141.

undermining their whole faith."[69] Western society's secularization is more nuanced than an atheistic abandonment of religious belief and practice. Young adults exist in a spiritually haunted world. They are more likely to identify as having no definable religious category, yet desiring elements of privatized spiritual practice.

Their World is Smaller

When young adults Walker and Nell Hall left California for China as missionaries in 1936, the journey took twenty-four days. Today, a flight from San Francisco to Beijing takes eleven hours. Their letters home took months to arrive. Today, a text message can be sent and received in a matter of seconds. Previously, young adults had little to no contact outside their geographic proximity – the world was big. Globalization has made a young adults' world smaller. Globalization is the term used to describe the compression of the world and resulting intensification of world conscience, increasing interdependence and valuing of all on the globe.[70] Technological interconnectivity and the ease of global travel contribute to the smaller world.

Young adults are digital natives. Ninety-two percent of teenagers report going online at least once per day and twenty-four percent of them confess going online "almost constantly."[71] Social media is the most significant communicational development affecting young adults in recent years with over seventy-one percent using more than one

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[69] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 329.

[70] This definition was influenced by Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1992), 8.

[71] Amanda Lenhart, "Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015," Internet and Technology, Pew Research Center, April 9, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/.

social media platform.[72] This generation have turned the proper noun "Google" into a verb. Young adults consume trillions of gigs of data.

Young adults frequently travel as "forty-three percent of young adults have visited other countries, while one-third (32%) hopes to do so in the next decade."[73] In the last five years, young adults from our faith community have traveled to Comoros, China, India, Maldives, Spain, Bolivia, the United Kingdom, France, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, and Tanzania for religious or humanitarian work. Young adults are exposed more, know more, and care more about world cultures than ever before.[74] A burgeoning worldwide young adult ethos, powered by the Internet, has brought them closer together. A young adult drinks Columbian fair-trade coffee, watches a Cambodian independent film with an Indian roommate, right after reading a post from a Tanzanian. This connectivity goes both ways as millions of young adults around the world demonstrated with Americans in response to the murder of George Floyd.[75]

Globalization has created a sense of personal responsibility in young adults as "seventy-seven percent of young adults say events around the world matter to them."[76] Real-time reporting of crisis through digital methods enable real-time engagement. Social justice issues are not hypothetical as they impact real people they know. Stories of

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[72] Lenhart, "Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015," Internet and Technology.

[73] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 41.

[74] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 207.

[75] In Minneapolis, MN on May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American was killed by law enforcement. A white police officer was recorded kneeling on Mr. Floyd's neck while he called for help. His death led to worldwide protests and outrage.

[76] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 18.

trafficked people, third-world poverty, and police brutality activate young adults because they are no longer stories of unknown others. They are inspired by Nobel Peace Prize nominee Greta Thunberg who was *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year for her fight against global warming at age sixteen.[77] They respond to needs by donating to go-fund-me accounts, using Facebook charity drives on their birthday, and marches. In relation to religious practice, access to diverse cultures results in increased appreciation for other religious beliefs, or pluralism. Access has led to awareness, awareness has led to association, and association has led to acceptance. Apologetics based on exclusivity are not helpful as they believe multiple ideologies can be equally valid.

Their World is Self-Segregated

One of the greatest blights on American history is forced segregation. The results for minority populations were catastrophic. One would assume a secular, smaller world's emphasis on privatization and acceptance would be a less segregated society. Yet, while the 1900s were known for *forced* segregation in America, young adults live in an increasingly *self*-segregated world. Young adults, while establishing their own private immanent frames, seek out others with similar "frames" to validate their experience. Not all young adults embrace pluralistic acceptance, as vestiges of old beliefs and prejudices remain. Secularism and privatization's goals of compatible, individualized frames are not realized. Technological innovation enables ideologically aligned individuals to find experiential resonance and solidarity. These varied and competing solidarities have

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[77] Charlotte Alter, Suyin Haynes, and Justin Worland, "Time 2019 Person of the Year: Greta Thunberg," *Time*, accessed December 2, 2020, https://time.com/person-of-the-year-2019-greta-thunberg/.

further divided, not unified the world. Competing solidarities develop into conflicting solidarities. The result of this self-segregation is a shift from beneficial discourse in the public square to scurrilous outbursts from individual platforms, coalescing over like against-ness rather than like-mindedness, and the celebration of diatribe.

Traditionally the public square was a place of idea exchange ideas and debate. People gathered in public squares to learn, celebrate, and even demonstrate. In a self-segregated world, "there is no longer a public square. It has been replaced with public *squares*."[78] I would go one step further. Self-segregation transforms public squares into competing platforms for expression, not proselytization.[79] The goal is no longer to reason together, but to be heard over others. The public square enabled thoughtful rhetoric and reasoned debate. Individual platforms are about declarations or emotional outbursts. In the public square, discourse led to refinement. Individual platforms do not desire dialogue or concession. Expertise in a field is not as crucial as conviction and passion. Statements are made, rancorous judgments passed, and positions calcified.

While young adults feel "better" after expressing themselves through their platforms, they still desire connections with others who think like them. Groups coalesce around religion, education, hobbies, vocations, neighborhoods, and just about anything else. In April 2019, four-hundred million people joined one of the millions of Facebook

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[78] Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019), 57. Emphasis mine. I am grateful to Sweet for introducing me to the idea of competing solidarities.

[79] I concede public squares remain important gathering places. The Arab Spring was launched from Cairo's Tahir Square, rejection of Chinese oppression found a semiotic symbol in Tiananmen Square, and there is no greater nexus of culture, entertainment, and commerce than New York's Times Square. Yet the collective force of personal platforms of blogs, books, posts, tweets, updates, statuses, and TikTok videos cannot be measured.

groups that provided "meaningful community."[80] Sadly, this convergence for meaningful community has shifted uniting over what we are collectively for, to what we are collectively against. Instead of speaking on behalf, people speaking against (e.g., #nevertrump, the alt-right movement, and anti-immigration groups).[81] This self-segregation ensures a lack of input from divergent viewpoints. Personal platforms turn into echo chambers when no outside voices are included. When every voice you hear sounds like you, you believe every voice in the world is you. Young adults find themselves in ideological bubbles where they only connect to people who agree with them.[82] During the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, voters often expressed they were not "for" a candidate but voting "against" a candidate. They voted for Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, or Donald Trump, not because they agreed with them, but because they were against their opponent.

Againstness quickly devolves into anger and hate, and its controversial diatribes are celebrated. Emboldened young adults "share" opinions and positions absent the context of public discourse. Online ranting – long, uninterrupted passionate positions against something – has become a right of everyone. Culture rewards espousing positions publicly on social media with more "likes" or followers. Social media has enabled

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[80] Salvador Rodriguez, "Mark Zuckerberg Shifted Facebook's Focus to Groups After the 2016 Election, and It's Changed How People Use the Site," Tech, CNBC, February 16, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/16/zuckerbergs-focus-on-facebook-groups-increases-facebook-engagement.html.

[81] The #nevertrump movement united people against Donald Trump's presidency. Alt-right groups (alternative right) are a loose federation of white nationalist groups. The anti-immigration movement coalesced around the hostility to immigration and advocated closed borders.

[82] Prior to the 2016 election, I flew on two airplanes. On the first plane out of the south, my seatmate said, "Donald Trump is going to win in a landslide. I don't know a single person voting for Hillary." On the next flight, my seatmate from California said, "Hillary Clinton is going to overwhelmingly win. I don't know a single person voting for Trump."

individual platforming to speak about human suffering and poor service at a restaurant with the same rigor and passion.

Rhetoric and attack have developed into an artform and shaming others is applauded. Rather than debating positions, attacks on individuals are preferred. Comedians "roast" others through weaponized humor. All while others consume the melee as entertainment.[83] Ridicule has been taken to ridiculous levels. The explosion of hate is more than words growing into actual violence. Road rage resulted in more than 200 murders and 12,000 injuries over a seven-year period.[84] While known for rivalries, American baseball reached new lows when San Francisco Giants fan Bryan Stow was left permanently disabled by two Dodgers fans following a game.[85] These examples illustrate the movement from outrage over injustice to rage over personal opinions. Subtly, the shift from conflicts of social justice have become conflicts of personal interest.

Self-segregation seems to conflict with the young adult ethos of a smaller world. Aren't young adults calling for greater acceptance and demanding social justice? Sadly, not all is as it seems. A serious look must be taken at the self-segregation, even among young adults. Minority populations live in fear while majority populations fight for lost privileges. During the largest immigration waves in United States history, some called for closed borders. White people say they want to live in diverse neighborhoods but choose

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[83] David Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 122.

[84] Taylor Covington, "Road Rage Statistics," The Zebra, August 18, 2020, https://www.thezebra.com/research/road-rage-statistics/#deaths.

[85] "Two Men Get Prison for Dodger Stadium Giants' Fan Attack," *CBS News*, February 20, 2014, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/two-men-plead-guilty-to-2011-beating-at-dodger-stadium/. Two years later, a Giants fan killed a Dodgers fan.

not to do so.[86] The number of multi-racial marriages increased, as did hate crimes.[87]

Minority young adults are frustrated at the lack of acknowledgment by majority

populations of their inherent privilege. Majority young adults are frustrated by rioting and

destruction of property. Each individual caught in this swirling web of frustration, anger,

and hate tries to find voices to align with for change. In its 2018 analysis, the Southern

Law and Poverty Center shared the following:

> The total number of hate groups rose to 1,020 in 2018, up about 7 percent from
> 2017. White nationalist groups alone surged by nearly 50 percent last year,
> growing from 100 chapters in 2017 to 148 in 2018. But at the same time, Trump
> has energized black nationalist hate groups — typically anti-Semitic and anti-
> LGBT organizations — with an increase to 264 from 233 in 2017. [88]

The new face of white nationalism, according to Heidi Beirich, director of the

Intelligence Project at the Sothern Poverty Law Center, is the young adult male.[89] The

boomerang response is an escalation of *anti*-anti groups. An enlightening

recommendation from the Homeland Security Advisory Council on Countering Violent

Extremism Subcommittee:

> Our nation's youth are at risk of online radicalization and recruitment like never
> before. They are by far the largest demographic being targeted by extremists,
> especially online. It is therefore our duty to protect them. Prioritized attention to
> the generation under 30 years old (digital natives across race, religion, ethnicity,

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[86] Alvin Chang, "White America is Quietly Self-segregating," *Vox*, last modified July 31, 2018, 08:26, https://www.vox.com/2017/1/18/14296126/white-segregated-suburb-neighborhood-cartoon.

[87] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46.

[88] Heidi Beirich, "The Year in Hate: Rage Against Change," *The Intelligence Report*, February 20, 2019, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2019/year-hate-rage-against-change.

[89] Rosanna Cooney, "White, Male, and Millennial: Hate Groups Tap Bro Culture to Recruit Members," Money and Democracy, The Center for Public Integrity, August 29, 2018, https://publicintegrity.org/politics/white-male-and-millennial-hate-groups-tap-bro-culture-to-recruit-members/.

location, socioeconomic levels, ideology, and gender) is required to prevent
violent ideologies from influencing this segment of our population. [90]

They report efforts of white supremacists, black nationalism groups, ISIL, and others use

stories and appeals that speak to belonging, purpose, and dignity, while emphasizing the

extremes of enemies. They target young adults for recruitment to fight the other side.

The beginning of the end of forced segregation in America were non-violent

protests of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. It will take similar call for non-violent

collaboration to end self-segregation. Churches who remain silent on this are perceived as

irrelevant, or worse, lack courage to address the situation. In 2020, the Black Lives

Matter movement gained significant traction among young adults. Young adults,

frustrated with the treatment of minorities, found solidarity together. They united to work

against the injustice of the world around them. The tragic deaths of African Americans

re-focused attention to the prejudicial treatment of people of color. The movement

resonated with young adults deeply concerned with injustice who marched in protest. But

even this positive move revealed self-segregational tendencies in young adults.

I lead a young adult group at a multi-ethnic church in a military town. In a recent

discussion of race and faith, one segment of young adults, both black and white, were

infuriated by individuals who knelt in protest during the national anthem. Another group

was infuriated their friends did not kneel with them. The majority were caught in the

middle and did not know what to do.

Only the future holds the outcome of these competing narratives. Which will win

out in this generation of young adults? Will it be self-segregation fueled by differences or

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[90] US Department of Homeland Security Advisory Council, *Interim Report and Recommendations from the Subcommittee on Countering Violent Extremism*, (Washington: Department of Homeland Security, 2016): 7, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=793483.

coming together for positive reasons? Self-segregation results in echo chambers that fuel hate. Self-segregation, left unchecked, will undo the laudable ideals of Millennials and Generation Z.

Their World is Stressed

The *American Psychological Association* identified Generation Z as having the highest average stress level of any age range.[91] Young adults today are no longer concerned about antiquated issues like binge drinking or unplanned pregnancy. Instead, seventy percent identify mental health issues like anxiety and depression as the dominant problems of their peers.[92] One-quarter of eighteen to thirty-five-year-olds encounter feelings of loneliness. The unemployed, students, women, and unmarried young adults experienced greater isolation and anxiety.[93] The sense of connection on a global scale through instant technological access creates a paradoxical experience of connection and isolation.[94] An interesting byproduct of this connection is young adults feel, "the impact of broad, global trends *more than* they feel loved and supported by others close to them, *more than* they feel optimistic and empowered, *more than* they express an outward orientation to change and personal activism."[95] In summary, they feel they care for others more than they feel cared for themselves.

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[91] "Stress in America 2020," Press Releases, American Psychological Association, accessed May 3, 2020, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/.

[92] Elmore and McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered*, 35.

[93] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 18.

[94] Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 42-43.

[95] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 24.

For millennials in America, 9/11 is arguably the most significant moment in their lives. It created a world that anticipates terroristic attacks. Historian Neil Howe rejected calling this group "Generation Z" instead choosing to call them "Homelanders." He chose the term because they launched the very first year the Department of Homeland Security was started.[96] Acts of terror dominate news cycles. Fear and anxiety are the cumulative effects of prolonged upbringing during these times.

Domestic terrorism and gun violence in the United States have exacerbated the feeling of insecurity and danger. The Sandy Hook Promise, which tracks gun violence against students, reports eight American children die from gun violence every day, and 1,216 school shootings have occurred since 1970. Nearly twenty percent of those occurred since January 2013.[97] Boomers conducted nuclear bomb drills in school, Gen Xers participated in fire and tornado drills, while this generation prepares for active shooter scenarios.[98]

Millennials came of age during the Great Recession. Economic uncertainty has been the norm for most of their lives, and some believe this generation will be the first in modern America to be poorer than its parents.[99] College degrees no longer guarantee

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[96] Neil Howe, "Introducing the Homeland Generation: Part 1 of 2," *Forbes*, October 27, 2014, https://www.forbes.com/sites/neilhowe/2014/10/27/introducing-the-homeland-generation-part-1-of-2/#10c2f2752bd6.

[97] "16 Facts About Gun Violence and School Shootings," Sandy Hook Promise, Accessed January 23, 2020, https://www.sandyhookpromise.org/gun-violence/16-facts-about-gun-violence-and-school-shootings/.

[98] As parents of high school students, we discussed what they should do if a shooter came on their campus. This discussion was terrifying for both them and us. Each has missed school days because of bomb threats.

[99] Annie Lowrey, "Millennials Don't Stand a Chance," *Atlantic*, April 13, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/millennials-are-new-lost-generation/609832/.

immediate employment as only one in four college graduates secure a job commensurate with their bachelor's degree.[100] Young adults' happiness correlates to their gainful employment while the unemployed or underemployed express more hopelessness and anxiety.[101]

An increase in debt compounds underemployment's effect.[102] The Institute for College Access & Success reported sixty-five percent of 2018 college seniors graduated with an average student loan debt of $29,200.[103] The Demos foundation called debt the defining characteristic of this generation as adults between eighteen and twenty-four-years-old have eleven percent higher credit card debt than those who were that age in 1989.[104] Stephanie, after five years of college, lives at home with over $70,000 in college debt. Her dream is to find a job or ministry working with the poor. Her debt prevents her dream from being a reality. She currently works for an insurance company and hopes someday to fulfill her dreams.

In 2020, fear found a new face as Covid-19 ravaged the world. Schools, churches, and businesses shut down. Hundreds of thousands of people died in the United States. The long-term effects remain to be seen. A recent study found from January 2020 to April 2020, over fifty-two percent of surveyed people under the age of forty-five (most

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[100] Bomar, *Worlds Apart,* 42.

[101] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 38.

[102] The long-term economic impact of COVID-19 are yet to be seen. At the time of writing, unemployment is at levels not seen since the Great Depression.

[103] Veronica Gonzales, Lindsay Ahlman and Anna Fung, "Student Debt and the Class of 2018," Institute for College Access & Success, accessed November 19, 2019, https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/classof2018.pdf.

[104] Carmen Wong Ulrich, *Generation Debt: Take Control of Your Money – A How to Guide* (New York: Warner Business Books, 2006), 3.

young adult workers) had lost a job, been put on leave, or had their hours reduced due to the pandemic.[105] In a study of Washington state residents, fifty-one percent of young adults expect to need help to pay their rent or mortgage, and fifty-three percent say they need help to pay for basic expenses like food or utilities.[106] Young adults fear for their health, the health of those they love, and for their jobs. Today's young adult faces a world filled with violence, terrorism, economic uncertainty, and now Covid-19.[107] This uncertainty has led to unprecedented numbers of young adults identifying themselves as stressed or suffering from anxiety.

Understanding a young adult's unique world prepares churches to appreciate their predicament and better help reach them. Their world is secular, smaller, self-segregated, and stressed. These snapshots give us insight into their complex world. In the next section, I will synthesize the findings of the previous sections to describe the current young adult experience.

Young Adulthood: A Complex Migration

In seeking to understand today's young adult, I analyzed developmental markers, faith stage development, and current trends. In the final part of this section, I synthesize these findings to inform our understanding of the young adult predicament to address

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[105] Charlotte Swasey, Ethan Winter, Ilya Sheyman, "The Staggering Economic Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic," Data for Progress, April 9, 2020, http://filesforprogress.org/memos/the-staggering-economic-impact-coronavirus.pdf, Page 2.

[106] Gene Balk, "Washington Young Adults are Getting Slammed Financially by Coronavirus Crisis, New Survey Shows," *Seattle Times*, April 15, 2020, https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/washington-young-adults-are-getting-slammed-financially-by-coronavirus-crisis-new-survey-shows/.

[107] As of December 5, 2020, the CDC reported 14,041,436 COVID cases with 275,386 deaths. https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days.

local church young adult retention. Rather than "defining" a young adult, I describe the young adult period of life as the transitional stage of life, typically during the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, when an individual traverses the complex migration from adolescence to adulthood.

Young adults are in the middle of a complex migration. This migration from adolescence to adulthood establishes one's unique identity. The rise of executive ego leads young adults to ask themselves important questions: "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" It is a complex migration because no specific factor defines the transition as contributing factors come from a milieu of social, familial, religious, and psychological influences. Smith and Snell, in their study of young adults, describe this complexity:

> Perhaps the most pervasive, consistent theme in the lives of emerging adults is the fact of their frequent and varied major life transitions. To an extent matched by no other time in the life course, emerging adults enjoy and endure multiple, layered, big, and often unanticipated life transitions.[108]

Young adults migrate through an ever-changing landscape filled with uncertainty in a secular, smaller, self-segregated, and stressed world. Like early pioneers who left the comfort of the known to travel into the unknown, they are both confident and terrified.

They feel the need to distance themselves from authority structures of their youth, yet in establishing their own identity, they want to maintain former attachments while finding new voices to inform them. Globalization opened their eyes to new peoples and new opportunities. In regard to belief and faith, secularity created a cross-pressured system where competing faith plausibility confused them. Anxiety and stress are voiced

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[108] Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

by young adults at unprecedented levels as the result of this complex migration as well as Covid-19, global and local violence, and economic uncertainty.

Problem of Young Adult Attrition

In 2009, a national longitudinal study of the spiritual and moral lives of American eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds revealed they were the least religious adults in the United States.[109] "Religiousness" was defined as participation in prayer, attending religious services, and beliefs about God and spirituality. Forty-three-point-three percent attended religious service less than once a month and considered faith "somewhat important" to "not very important" in their everyday lives. Twenty-five-point-five percent identified as "not religious." When it comes to prayer, strong affiliation, religious service attendance, and religious identity among American adults, young adults are much less religious than older ones.

Some argue church involvement is not necessary for a Christian and allegiance to the established church is in and of itself the problem.[110] They believe the loss of young adults from the evangelical church are not losses to Christianity and might be a good thing, not a bad thing.[111] While I believe there is value in this discussion and the challenges offered must be engaged with, I do not do so here.[112] Suffice to say, for now, participation in a faith community is an essential component of the spiritual life of a

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[109] Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 102.

[110] An excellent discussion of this is found in the book *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* by Frank Viola and George Barna.

[111] Batchelder, "Exvangelical," 33.

[112] A detailed argument for this is found in the Artifact website.

believer. Church attendance is an effective measuring tool for analyzing spiritual engagement and an established metric of faith life.

How Many are Leaving?

In general, fewer young adults are attending church. Incongruent methodology and variable categories make it impossible to arrive at an exact number of how many young adults leave the church, but Thom Rainer and Barna Research Group's analysis of the de-churched give a safe baseline. Barna Research's 2019 finding affirmed Lifeway's conclusion that "nearly two-thirds of all young adults who were once regular churchgoers have dropped out at one time or another."[113] Rainer's words from 2008 have held true:

> Our journey started with a study of eighteen- to thirty-year-old adults in America. These young adults attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year while they were in high school. Here is the incredible but sad finding of this study: More than two-thirds of young churchgoing adults in America drop out of church between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.[114]

It is safe to say over two-thirds of young adults stop practicing their faith through church attendance in the years immediately following adolescence. Commensurate with this attrition is the increase of nones (individuals who self-identify their religious preference as none).

Not everyone agrees rising numbers of those who identify themselves as "nones" means there is an increasing number of people leaving faith. Adam Pallay suggests this generation is no different than others, it is just the first to live out religious discontent in a digital age. It is not that "more young adults are areligious than before," but it is now

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[113] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 15.

[114] Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 2.

acceptable and communicable to "identify as areligious."[115] The number of individuals leaving is the same as before, it is a lack of consequence for this self-reporting. Reiss points out:

> This seems like a circular argument: The nones are growing because the nones are growing! But sociologically, it makes a kind of sense. Some nonbelievers might have stayed in organized religion in previous generations just because it was socially expected, and there were consequences for not joining the religious crowd. The numeric growth of the nones has removed some of those barriers, so that other closet nones feel more comfortable leaving religion too. There is an infrastructure and support system for them.[116]

Statistics aside, these prodigal young adults haunt the parents and leaders who invested so much in them. In our church, we do not need statistics to reinforce what Kathy, Raymond, Rachel, Kelly, DeMarcus, and Anthony already have taught us. They are not here anymore. Worse, they are not actively practicing their faith anywhere.

Why are They Leaving?

The period of complex migration creates challenges for young adults to stay connected. The complexity of young adulthood removes the assumption there is "one reason" for young adults leaving. Simple answers to complex questions do not adequately address the needed emphasis to reach young adults.[117] Yet it is clear, young adult attrition church falls into two categories: situational forces and ideological forces.

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[115] Adam Pallay, "The Prophetic Hope of Emerging Adulthood: Emerging Together Toward an Abundant Life" (DMin diss., George Fox University, 2015), Page 25.

[116] Jana Reiss, "Why Millennials Are Really Leaving Religion (It's Not Just Politics, Folks)," *PBS,* July 16, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2018/07/16/millennials-really-leaving-religion-not-just-politics-folks/34880/.

[117] In Section Three, I argue for an integrated robust response to this complexity.

Situational Forces

The migration into adulthood transitions young adults from known situations into unknown situations. The situational forces associated with this movement leads some to disengage from church. In *Essential Church*, young adults overwhelmingly attributed life change, or the situational nature of migration, as the reason for church disengagement. The survey of church dropouts identified ten reasons young adults drop out of church: (1) Simply wanted a break from church; (2) Moved to college; (3) Change in work responsibilities; (4) Moved too far away from church; (5) Became too busy, though still wanted to attend; (6) Spending more time with friends outside of church; (7) School responsibilities preventing me from attending church; (8) Wanted to make life decisions not accepted by the church; (9) Family and/or home responsibilities preventing me from attending; and (10) Lost touch with my churchgoing friends.[118] Jana Riess adds delayed marriage, or the choice to not marry at all, and lower fertility rates (her term for couples who choose not to have children).[119] The majority of these reasons have little to do with philosophical, ideological, or even religious reasons. Most of were related to geographical realities, increased responsibility, and a lack of maintaining meaningful church relationships. Like Jalen and Sophia, they moved, went to college, and lost touch.

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[118] Rainer and Rainer, *Essential Church,* 3-4.

[119] Jana Reiss, "Why Millennials Are Really Leaving Religion (It's Not Just Politics, Folks)," *PBS,* July 16, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2018/07/16/millennials-really-leaving-religion-not-just-politics-folks/34880/.

Ideological Forces

The above data needs to be contrasted with other research, however. David

Kinnaman's research identified deeper ideological forces at play in young adult attrition.

The six reasons for church dropout he identified were churches are overprotective,

shallow, anti-science, repressive (in regard to sexuality), exclusive, and doubtless.[120] He

concluded, "most young Christians are struggling less with their faith in Christ than with

their experience of Church."[121] Young adults are not just leaving church because they

have physically moved. They are leaving church because some have ideologically

moved, or they feel the church has ideologically moved from them. More extreme in her

positions, but an important perspective to include are voices like Colleen Batchelder, who

wrote this about those leaving the church:

> Their generational dissonance is not due to personal preference. Many distanced
> themselves from the church – more specifically the evangelical church - because
> of the underlying ideology of racism, sexism, homophobia, and nationalism. As
> discussed in the previous chapters, Millennials and Generation Z began their
> nomadic journey away from the sanctuary because they felt that the church was
> keeping them from God.[122]

These ideological differences are important to young adults and cut against traditional

values of orthodox Christianity. Young adults are forced to engage with issues of

equality, gender, poverty, and oppression. Sadly, they find the church landing on

different positions than their own. In Barna's study of Generation Z, today's teenagers

are more open to the idea that gender is determined by how one feels, not by birth. Seven

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[120] Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 92-93.

[121] Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 27.

[122] Batchelder, "Exvangelical," 143.

out of ten say it is acceptable to be born one gender and feel like another, while two out of five contend it is okay for someone to change their body to become another gender.[123] While accusations of close-mindedness and hypocrisy are not new, today's young adults find dissonance in the values and priorities of the church. Young adults view sexual preference and gender identification not as choices but as identity issues.[124] This position is a break from the historic church positions and orthodox interpretations of Scripture. These issues represent more than just opinions and political positions, but speak to the nature of humanity, biblical instruction, and the application of these instructions. Younger Christians struggle to maneuver these ideological landscapes. They saw evangelical church alignment with Donald Trump as a dereliction of biblical piety on the part of the church. The God of love, acceptance, and peace they see in Jesus does not look like the anti-rights, anti-homosexual, or anti-(insert object here) the church world espouses. Like Kyle and Ryan, they question the necessity of church.

The answer to why young adults leave includes both situational and ideological reasons. Barna discovered ideological shifts; Rainier identified situational ones. Some leave because they reject church. Some leave for reasons they cannot even identify. Others leave because they no longer have a strong enough connection to hold them. Of note is Rainer's discovery that a strong majority (eighty percent) of high school students do not plan to leave their church after graduation.[125] Their unplanned departure reflects the magnetic pull of the young adult's world milieu. Those who blame situational forces

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[123] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 47.

[124] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 48-49.

[125] Rainer and Rainer, *Essential Church*, 83.

miss the complexity of young adulthood. Those like Batchelder, who claim positional irrelevance of church, must be heard, but their claims should be evaluated. The Potemkin argument all young adults abandon church or find no relevance in its message is unproven. The real question is – does their leaving matter to us?

Summary

Disengagement from church has significant consequences for young adults. Religious young adults are more likely to have higher scores on positive life outcomes than non-religious young adults.[126] They conclude religion still matters in ways that make a difference in relationships, attitudes, experiences, and behaviors for young adults. Whether a lack of church attendance is situational or ideological, the church must attempt to engage and keep them.

As a church, we are failing young adults. Churches lost in apathetic torpor communicate an indifference at best, rejection at worse. While I disagree with many of her conclusions, Colleen Batchelder's statement is powerful:

> The majority of unreached individuals have firsthand experience with one or more Christian churches and, based on that sampling, have decided that they can better use their time in other ways. This fact should motivate us to examine how our local church looks in the eyes of the dechurched and consider making appropriate changes – not for the sake of enhancing attendance numbers but to address the possibility that we do not always behave like the church Christ died for.[127]

A movement may be emerging, contemporary, or trendy, but if it does not create engaged lifelong followers of Jesus Christ, it fails. If it creates incredible spiritual experiences, but does not assist young adults for their complex migration it failed.

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[126] Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 275.

[127] Batchelder, "Exvangelical," 142.

In Section One, we developed an understanding of what a young adult is by analyzing the markers of young adulthood, faith development implications of this life stage and the uniqueness of the current young adult world. Next, we evaluated the young adult attrition from the local church and some of the reasons why this takes place. Young adults are in a transitional stage of life, typically are between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, who are traversing the complex migration from adolescence to adulthood. This migration is accentuated by critical distancing and self-establishment. Young adults are under enormous internal and external pressures impacting the way they believe and practice their faith. The result is over two-thirds of young adults who participated in church life prior to young adulthood stop doing so during the young adult years. In Section Two, I will offer alternative options to address this problem. In Section Three, I will introduce the Meshed Ministry approach for retaining young adults.

Imagine a car company discovered two-thirds of cars manufactured at a particular factory stopped working one year after production. The factory would be closed and the company would evaluate and change the manufacturing process. We must be honest about the lack of success our ministries are having with young adults. Blaming outside influences only is abdicating our responsibility. It is time to evaluate and change our process of developing followers of Jesus Christ. The future of the body of Christ is at stake. The future of our children and grandchildren hangs in the balance. It is my hope that the ideas contained in this project will contribute to the trend's reversal. After all, church dropouts include my high school best friend, a college roommate, and members of my family.

SECTION TWO:

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

In Section Two, I present alternative approaches for local church young adult retention. Each of the solutions, except the final one, has merit in reaching and discipling young adults. Successful churches and ministries use these solutions with varying results. These other solutions should be viewed as options to be practiced in concert with each other. These complement each other, rather than compete.

Campus-based College Ministry

College campus ministry has a rich tradition and its impact has been well documented. [128] Organizations like CRU (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), Intervarsity, and Chi Alpha have ministered to young adults for decades. Campus ministry is needed because colleges are filled with young adults. Campus ministry is not the only solution for young adults. Millions of young adults in the United States do not attend college. Many students attending college never engage campus ministry. Many campus ministries lack a strong connection to the local church, seeing themselves as a church on the campus. The "church on campus" model can have unintended consequences. While working at our denominational headquarters, Mary was my administrative assistant. She had come to faith through a campus ministry. While there, she faithfully attended and served as a ministry leader. Chi Alpha had a worship gathering, small groups, missions, outreach, and leadership opportunities, so she had no

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[128] For a moving history, see Michael Gleason's *When God Walked on Campus* (Ontario: Joshua Press, 2002).

need to attend a local church. When Mary graduated, she left Chi Alpha and began

working with me. As part of employment, church attendance was a requirement of our

denominational offices. Six months after her she started, Mary came to my office crying.

She "confessed" she had not attended church. "I have never gone to church in my life. I

cannot find anything like Chi Alpha. I do not want to go to church, I want to go to Chi

Alpha."

Plant Young Adult Churches

Studies show planting churches is the most effective way to grow the church.[129]

Niche churches, churches targeting a group of people based on demographics or interest,

are a growing trend in church planting.[130] A specific target enables the church planter to

tightly focus outreach and create experiences that resonate with the desired attendee.

Young adults feel more comfortable in the environment created for them. Leaders are

able to focus on the shared needs of their congregation. It may be that an existing

congregation is unable to make a shift to reach young adults, so a new church must be

started.

Church planting for under-served populations has merit. While successful, if

church planters are not careful, they neglect intergenerational components modeled in the

New Testament. The local church should embody the diverse body of Christ, both young

and adult. When this happens, young adults miss opportunities to learn from older

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[129] Ed Stetzer, "The Importance of Church Planting" *Influence,* Sept. 17, 2017, https://influencemagazine.com/Practice/The-Importance-of-Church-Planting.

[130] Niche church examples: Cowboy churches, skater churches, millennial churches, and biker churches. Visit https://www.thedoubtersclub.com/; http://crossroadscowboychurchar.com/; https://www.thebikerchurch.org/.

generations. Isolation based on preference also can unintentionally reinforce a consumeristic model of Christianity. Niche church planting, if necessary, should still embody the interlaced connectivity presented in Section Three of this paper.

Update Current Services or Create Alternative Services

The term "contemporary service" is now ubiquitous across denominational lines. In the effort to attract and keep younger parishioners, churches rethink and repackage existing church services or start alternative services. This redesign flows on a continuum of change based on the leadership's and congregation's openness to doing things differently. Changes in liturgy, music, communication styles, dress, and the use of multi-media are examples of this approach. To reach young adults, other churches have created additional services targeting young adults. These contemporary and young-adult targeting services create a community for young adults by grouping them with each other.

Updating church practice is a necessary part of church life. However, adjusting style without addressing the systemic problems of young adulthood is not enough. While age and culturally specific ministry are important for young adults, integrating them into the overall life of the community is equally vital. Updating style is not a substitute for addressing the life-stage needs of young adults. It is more than style. Cross-generational interactions are strained as the groups are separated from each other.

Wait for Young Adults to Come Back

"Young adults leave church in their twenties to have fun and sow their wild oats. Just wait, when they get married and have kids, they will settle down and come back to church." I have heard this numerous times. This approach sees young adult wandering as

a phase that young adults go through. "Train up a child in the way it should go, and they will not depart from it," is one of their favorite verses. If we can be patient, we can wait them out.

Transitions in life, such as marriage and raising children, do impact faith practice. Many young adults pursue faith options during young adult years. This approach, however, is the most dangerous of all alternatives listed. It assumes that a "prodigal phase" is a necessary part of a person's life. Jesus did not say, "Come follow me, except if you are in your early twenties." When he calls his disciples and followers to die to themselves and take up their cross, he does not follow it up with "except when you are in college."

Regardless of soteriology, when taking this approach, leaders concede they are comfortable with young adults living independent of religious practice for a period of time. This is unacceptable. We need patience with young adults who leave church, however, we dare not excuse ourselves from actively engaging young adults where they currently are. Institutional indifference damns a generation.

SECTION THREE:

THESIS

Section One identified the problem of church retention of young adults and sought to understand what about the young adult predicament caused this. Young adults are in a transitional stage of life, typically are between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, and are traversing the complex migration from adolescence to adulthood. This migration is accentuated by critical distancing. As a result, over two-thirds of young adults leave a necessary part of spiritual formation, namely church attendance, behind. In Section Two, I analyzed alternate ways the Christian community has tried to mitigate young adult attrition. In Section Three, I present a church ministry approach to retain young adults called *Meshed Young Adult Ministry*. Meshed ministry to young adults is less about what to do and more how to do it. Meshed modalities describe the values and culture of a young adult ministry. When these are implemented, what a ministry does naturally occurs and young adults remain connected to the church and its leaders.

In 1888, Lewis Haslam revolutionized the textile industry when he introduced Aertex fabric (mesh). While material with holes in it had been used for thousands of years, it was not until Haslam observed his aunt's hole-filled gloves that the idea of mesh fabric was born. Seeing her hands were warm despite the many holes, he and others founded Aertex, becoming the first producer of mesh fabric. Various companies used mesh, but Adidas adopted Aertex mesh fabric as its primary material for its shoes and athletic apparel, mesh fabric became an industry standard. Mesh fabric's lightweight permeability is achieved by loosely interlaced strands of fabric resulting in tiny holes in

the mesh garment. [131] Interlacing creates evenly spaced openings resulting in a stronger versatile fabric characterized by adaptability, elasticity, and breathability.

Mesh topology describes computer networking systems built for maximum connectivity. Using an interconnected structure, meshed networks build multiple redundant links across a network to bolster connectivity. Every component of the network is connected directly to other components (referred to as nodes). [132] This networking strategy has an advantage over others, as there is no single point of failure. If one area goes down, network integrity is maintained as connections are already replicated.

Targeted, generational ministry in the church is not new as they have focused attention on children and youth for centuries. However, young adult ministry has often been neglected by churches. They expect young adults to transition from youth ministry to the larger church without migration assistance. A specific approach to young adult ministry enables a church to help young adults' transition to adulthood.

Ministry to young adults is a biblical imperative. Generationally diverse layers are modeled throughout Scripture. Solomon addresses many of his proverbs to his son. Jesus modeled cross-generational ministry by allowing young and old to be his ministry following.[133] Psalm 148:12 commands all creation, young, old, men, and women to

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[131] "Mesh Fabrics: Knitting and Finishing Nylon and Polyester Mesh and Netting," Jason Mills, November 11, 2019, https://www.jasonmills.com/blog/index.php/2019/11/11/mesh-fabrics/.

[132] "Meshed Topology," Science Direct, accessed September 18, 2020, https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/computer-science/mesh-topology#:~:text=A%20mesh%20topology%20has%20multiple,mesh%20topology%20are%20as%20follows%3A&text=A%20mesh%20topology%20provides%20redundant%20links%20across%20the%20network.

[133] While Scripture is silent on the disciples' ages, disciples were typically younger than their Rabbi. Jesus began his ministry at thirty, thus it is logical to assume they were young adults.

worship and praise the Lord.[134] Paul gives Titus instructions on how young and old are to

work together in a cross-generational experience.[135] Younger leaders are to be taught and

encouraged. Older leaders are to be revered. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel 2

and said God's Spirit would be on both the old and young. It is fair to ask, "How will the

dreams of the young men and women inspire older generations and how will the visions

of older generations guide young adults if they are never together?"[136] The stories of

Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego all point to the impact and

importance of young adults in Scripture.

Today's church must heed the commentary of Judges 2:10: "After that whole

generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew

neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel."[137] Young adult ministry is a survival

imperative as well as a biblical imperative.

In Section One, I introduced Sarah, a young adult who met with me about paying

for college. While writing, I often ask young adults to evaluate my work. Sarah read my

claims about her generation and ministry to it. After reading that section, she left this

well-articulated response on a Post-it note:

> "Read all the way through. I enjoyed reading it and it made me think. In the last
> pages in particular. I think that YA do not necessarily need a church to think like
> them to attend but need the love, respect and guidance that Jesus has modeled for
> us. He didn't always agree but respected them."

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[134] Compare Psalm 22; Psalm 45; Psalm 71; Psalm 78:4; Psalm 145.

[135] Titus 2.

[136] Acts 2:17-21.

[137] Judges 2:10.

Sarah's words should bring comfort and hope to church leaders. They do me. Young adults need love, respect, and guidance. They do not want us to become like them. They need our willingness to adapt and to expand while they push us to the limits. They need us to respect the complexity of their migration into adulthood. They need us to keep loving them, even when their internal drive to distance pulls them away. They need us to guide them with Jesus-like respect. Like Jesus, we sit with them, eat with them, challenge them, teach them, and give them hope. If necessary, we sacrifice what we have, so they remain with us.

Meshed Ministry Modalities

Meshed modalities are the foundational values forming the substratum of Meshed Young Adult ministry. Modalities speak to ministry attitudes, not activities. *What* a ministry does is not as important as *why* it does it. A church may implement new ministry practices (i.e., service schedules, small groups, discipleship models, etc.), but its attitudes, ideals, and culture serve as underpinnings of ministry expressions and should not change. Jim Bradford explains it this way, "If mission determines what a team does, values describe how the team does it. Values act like guardrails around the mission and shape the convictions that guide team behavior. Vision, then, is a picture of the future if the mission and values were lived out. But at the heart of it all are the values. They spell out the process steps for building team health."[138] Implementing a culture of ministry, its modalities, takes intentional effort as it is more difficult than conducting ministry

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[138] James Bradford, *Lead So Others Can Follow: 12 Practices and Principles for Ministry* (Springfield, MO: Salubris Resources, 2015), chap. 7, sec. 1, Kindle.

activities. Modalities take precedence over vision. Meshed ministry builds on four modalities: (1) adaptable engagement; (2) interlaced structures; (3) elastic shaping; and (4) breathable sanctuaries. These complimentary modalities form the bedrock for meshed ministry and its implementation.

As long as a church is fulfilling the Great Commission and following its mandate to disciple and train believers, it will be reaching young adults. As long as young adults are present in a local church, then young adult ministry takes place. A church, regardless of size or location, can minister to young adults. For some, this will mean the creation of specific young adult ministry programs. For others, it means existing church ministries should intentionally incorporate young adult concerns into their curriculum and planning. The question is not *if* young adult ministry is important, but *how* are we going to minister to young adults?

Adaptable Engagement

Meshed fabric adapts to the shape of the object it holds. Meshed networking follows a similar modality. When a mobile device is wirelessly connected to a network, the system maintains connection as the device moves. The network, not the device, intentionally keeps engagement as long as possible. In both scenarios, designers intend the mesh to adapt to maintain system integrity and connection.

Meshed ministry expands and contracts with young adults by adapting to their needs. Adaptability means not overreacting as situational forces facilitate church disengagement. David Kinnaman referred to young adults wandering from faith as "nomads." The nomad's departure was less an intentional choice and more a "slow fade"

over months or years.[139] When a church is willing to adapt, fades turn into vibrant

displays of church engagement. Adaptable engagement enables a church to expand as

young adults push against established structures when they critically distance.

Church leaders make the intentional decision to engage young adults, help them

develop spiritually, and adapt existing structures to meet needs. Over the course of

twenty years of ministry to young adults, we have adapted ministry strategies to the needs

of young adults many times. Music styles, service programming, meeting times, and

church décor have changed. What did not change was the intentionality of connecting

with young adults and the gospel's power to change their lives.

Many churches do not see the need for engagement. Leaders of churches

effectively reaching young adults identified the initial obstacle for reaching young adults

was the congregation's unwillingness to change.[140] Generational gaps, lack of motivated

volunteers, the false confidence current efforts are sufficient, and a lack of

comprehensive strategy stand in the way of effective ministry. The inability of the church

to engage its young adults catalyzes their departure. When young adults desire help

migrating the complexities of adulthood, many cannot find it in their local church.[141]

A ministry assessment is a first step in adaptive engagement. Assessment

identifies young adults already engaged with the church, leads to discovering a church's

strengths and weaknesses, and identifies new opportunities. Alton Garrison points out,

"Our willingness to be honest and unreserved in answering these assessment questions

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[139] Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 63.

[140] Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 292.

[141] Konstam, *Emerging and Young Adulthood*, 141.

will go a long way towards determining the types of answers we get and whether or not they are helpful."[142] A meshed approach allows churches to expand to the needs of its own young adults and focus on what its assessment reveals.[143]

First Assembly of God, North Little Rock, Arkansas had a successful ministry to students. In denominational circles, its youth leaders were identified as exemplary. In its community, few churches had a larger youth attendance. Youth ministry was a source of pride for the church and its staff. From all typical measurables, First Assembly was doing a good job reaching and discipling students. Despite this, Lead Pastor Rod Loy believed something was not right. While large numbers of students attended in high school, they left as young adults.

As a twenty-year staff member, Loy had a unique perspective. He had served as children's pastor, youth pastor, and executive pastor before becoming lead pastor. He felt a keen sense of personal responsibility for this lack of retention. When he shared his concerns with other leaders, the response was defensive. Excuses for retention revolved around the situational forces or they blamed others.

Loy described the day he forced youth leaders to engage the problem, "I made everyone get in my SUV. I wouldn't let them out until we all got it. We drove until we were on the same page and had a plan to stop the loss of students." The four-hour drive was painful and one of the most important of their ministry lives.

"We disagreed for miles," said Loy. "Then, at mile marker 127 on Interstate 30, something broke. The weight of the loss of students overwhelmed us. Our part in their

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[142] Alton Garrison, *A Spirit Empowered Church: An Acts 2 Ministry Model* (Springfield: Influence Resources, 2015), 78.

[143] In the project, a self-assessment tool details this process.

departure was heavy. All began weeping as we brought up names of students we knew who were no longer following Christ. We began dreaming of a new, better way to do ministry and how to engage with lost young adults."[144] The personal introspection led to a churchwide assessment of generational ministry and the implementation to a targeted young adult ministry.

An example of this adaptation is the necessity to move from in person ministry to online ministry. Adaptation to mobile, online ministry engagement is a must for young adult ministry. Young adults are digital natives, as such, meshed ministries provide integrated technological connection points. When young adults arrive, they bring the online world with them, therefore digital content is essential for spiritual formation. This runs the continuum of text messages to online broadcasts. In our Young Adult services, students have been challenged to re-tell Bible stories through TikTok.[145] An online platform enables young adults engage outside a physical space. Social media, blogs, and YouTube are necessary components. For preachers, the message never ends at the "Amen." It lives on through the online dialogue and interaction after the preaching event. Jennifer Miles suggests churches prioritize visual content that is short in length (three to five minutes).[146] Young adults continue to contribute to the discussion throughout the week with posts, hashtags, and shares. Students away at college and those who have

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[144] Rod Loy, interview by author, North Little Rock, May 15, 2008.

[145] Check out some of them at the UNITE YouTube Channel here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIFXTDYaYM9ibItcW2bcTGL01CnlUhas-.

[146] Jennifer Miles, "Discipleship in a Digital Age: Leveraging Multimodality and Digital Networks" (DMin diss., George Fox University, 2020), 54.

moved because of young adult transitions have stayed connected to our ministry through the internet.

Some suggest we should create environments free from technology. There is merit to this argument, however, it misses the overarching reality. Asking Millennials and Generation Z to unplug from their devices is as foreign a concept as asking a fish to unplug from water. Digital does not describe their environment. It is their existence. Meshed ministry leaders balance these dueling realities. Church leader George P. Wood advises, "Technology and social media should serve personal relationships, not substitute for them."[147] Technological innovation is a tool of gospel proclamation. It is a means of connection, not the connection itself. An over-reliance on technology can inhibit personal relationships and interactions, yet this is not an either-or discussion. Meshed ministry leverages the digital world.

The 2020's Covid-19 pandemic underscored the importance of online ministry. For months, individuals around the globe sheltered in place and physical interactions were impossible. Ministries with a digital footprint carried the day. Our young adult service was able to seamlessly move online for services and small group interactions. After four months of no gatherings, our young adult service relaunched with limited attendance. It required both an in-person experience as well as an online experience. Three months later, we have as many online participants as in-room participants.

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[147] George P. Wood, "The Tech-Wise Pastor: Don't Let Your Smartphone Become a Needless Distraction," *Influence*, July 6, 2017, https://influencemagazine.com/en/Practice/The-Tech-Wise-Pastor.

Interlaced Connectivity

Woven, interlaced structures constitute meshed fabric. Individual strands are strengthened through this interlacing. Each strand replicates its individual attributes throughout the fabric for exponential strength. Meshed networking accomplishes a similar process by moving data across a series of interconnected distribution points called nodes. If one node fails, another connected node compensates for lost efficiency. The more nodes on the network, the more stable the connection and the more data flow is preserved. Engineers refer to this process as self-healing. Meshed young adult ministry, through interlaced support, becomes self-replicating and self-healing.

A self-replicating meshed ministry does not build a separate ministry from the overall church. Replicated connection points establish relational redundancies to mitigate loss. The more connections a church attaches to a young adult, the stronger its network. *Growing Young's* analysis discovered no church reached young adults with only one person.[148] Every ministry of the local church should view itself as one node of the mesh working together to build lifelong followers of Jesus. James O. Davis describes networking as the tying of relationships for a greater cause. Individual strings can be used to catch one fish, but when tied together, they make a net to catch a lot of fish.[149] While each person plays an integral part in retaining young adults, when we are interlaced together, we keep more.

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[148] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 23.

[149] James O. Davis, *How to Make Your Net Work: Tying Relational Knots for Global Impact* (Orlando: Cutting Edge International, 2013), 25.

Meshed ministry's interlayered connections are self-healing. When a young adult distances himself or herself from one connection point, another is ready to repair the connection. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a meshed ministry to raise a life-long follower of Jesus Christ. Young adults want these connections. They want to learn from people of various ages and backgrounds. As they critically distance, young adults look for new voices of influence, while trying to keep some in their lives.

Young adult leaders cooperate with other ministry leaders to create cohesion in curriculum and experience. The discipleship process in a local church should be viewed as one continuous journey of personal transformation. Each department in the church should build upon the work of the previous one to help individuals the most. This is best accomplished through intentional integration into the overall church. Intentional interlacing is a strategy employed at First Assembly. Student ministry pastors are involved in children's area as well as young adult ministry activities. The Young Adult Pastor speaks at youth events. Young adults need a strong interlaced network to keep them when they try to leave. A meshed ministry helps these young adults by interlacing sages who reach back, leaders who reach down, mentors who reach within, peers who reach across, and healers who reach around.

Sages Who Reach Back

Young adults who have grown up in church have existing church relational connections with former adult spiritual leaders. These leaders have years of influence in the young adult's life. They can serve as sages, wise leaders guiding them through new paths of life. The connection of prior spiritual mentors through young adulthood makes retention more realistic. Yes, they critically distance, but want to maintain some

connection to trusted voices. It makes sense we connect young adults back to the people in their lives who helped earlier.

Sages establish a ministry of presence in the lives of individuals. A ministry of presence occurs when we decide to be present and active in the life of a young adult. No amount of strategizing can replace the responsibility of churches and fellow followers of Jesus Christ to "stay in the game" with young adults. Nothing can replace a "ministry of presence" in the life of a young adult. They may choose of their own volition to walk away, but they do that in spite of our presence in their lives. Our helpful presence in their lives communicates our compassion and love for them. It communicates our readiness to guide them, forgive them, and welcome them home like the father waiting on his prodigal son. A lack of presence communicates our disinterest, our lack of compassion, and our judgment.

Brian Dollar has been children's pastor at First Assembly of God in North Little Rock for twenty-one years. His longevity creates the opportunity for him to be children's pastor for two generations of children. Dozens of former children, who had him as a children's pastor, now serve in children's ministry as adults. Why? His influence in their lives continues. They remember fondly their days in children's ministry *from* Pastor Brian and now do it *with* him.

Leaders Who Reach Down

Church leaders reach down to young adults during their complex migration into adulthood. In *Essential Church*, research of young adult dropouts revealed the importance of the senior pastor and church services to young adults. Over half of the

dropouts (fifty-eight percent) left because of a pastor or church related reasons.[150] Church

leaders are the linchpin for cross-generational discipleship. Pastor Mike Glenn saw this as

so important to reaching young adults that he took over his church's young adult

ministry. Their ministry, Kairos, experimented with different church activities attractive

to young adults, but none achieved desired goals until the leader engaged.[151]

While it is impractical for every pastor to become the primary mentor of every

young adult in their congregation, it is imperative they control the narrative about their

support of it. Young adults look to leaders for guidance and interaction. Many pastors

question whether their age eliminates them from relevance with young adults. *Growing

Young* concluded, "While there is certainly some value in having young leaders who can

connect with young people, it is not the whole story. When interview participants from

our study were asked why their church is effective with young people, only one in ten

mentioned having younger leaders."[152] When they asked young adults why they attend

their church, only thirteen percent identified relevant leaders while eighty-seven percent

identified authenticity of leaders or other qualities.[153] Age and relevance may be factors,

but leadership authenticity overcomes age.

Young adults are looking for authentic, accessible leaders to guide them. Doug

Clay wisely said, "Today's young people, though, value authenticity. If those around

them are too self-protective, these young people don't trust them very much. Older people

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[150] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 115.

[151] Mike Glenn and Thom S. Rainer, *In Real Time: Authentic Young Adult Ministry as It Happens*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 13.

[152] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 59.

[153] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 61.

are impressed with the size of a person's dream, but the younger generation is looking for the authenticity of a dreamer's heart."[154] While young adults may be skeptical of sources of authority and institutions, authentic engagement bridges the chasm of distrust. Young adults need leaders who can help them dream. Church leaders themselves benefit from reaching down. Earl Creps calls the process of mutually beneficial mentoring reverse mentoring. He writes, "Reverse mentoring (RM) is cross-cultural in that it actually uses the unlikely possibility of a relationship to benefit both parties through mutual learning from honesty and humility."[155] Pastors will learn from young adults when he or she allows them in their lives.

Kevin, a 21-year-old college senior, experienced a major life crisis. Kevin grew up at First Assembly of God, and even though he had spent very little personal time with Pastor Rod Loy, during the crisis, he reached out to him. Pastor Rod has been a part of pivotal moments in Kevin's life. He dedicated Kevin as a child. He was there when Kevin was baptized. When Kevin graduated high school, part of his gift from the church was a letter from Pastor Rod committing to be in his life forever. Every summer, Pastor Rod was the youth camp speaker, an intentional decision to give Rod the opportunity to connect with students. When Kevin was in trouble, of course he called Pastor Rod. As a leader, Rod had reached down to Kevin. When Kevin needed help, he reached out.

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[154] Doug Clay, *Dreaming in 3D: Finding and Following God's Amazing Plan for Your Life* (Springfield: Influence Resources, 2011), chap. 6, sec. 4, Kindle.

[155] Earl Creps, *Reverse Mentoring: How Young Leaders Can Transform the Church and Why We Should Let Them* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), introduction, sec. 2, Kindle.

Mentors Who Reach Within

Young adults seek intergenerational mentorship as they desire relationships with experienced people. James Fowler believed integrational interaction helped foster progressive faith development.[156] As young adults move forward into individuative-reflective faith, they need mentors to reach within them to help faith develop. The presence of a positive mentor in a young adult's life eases the complexity of traversing young adulthood. Mentors are more than advice givers. They observe the inherent gifts and talents within a young adult and pull it out of them. Mentors act as models for young adults as they teach from experience and guide young adults as they transition into adulthood.[157]

As a student, campus ministry leaders instilled in Rachel the need for personal Bible study and faith commitment. After she graduated from medical school, she transitioned from a "recipient" of young adult ministry to becoming a mentor in young adult ministry. Local college students appreciate her first-hand knowledge of maneuvering the college system. Medical students receive advice on vocational issues and educational development. Her involvement in their lives is more than vocational assistance, it is devotional. She champions spiritual development through group Bible studies. Young adult girls, in Rachel's words, "do life" with her. They eat at her house, go shopping with her, sit in church together, and whatever else is happening. They see

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[156] James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 189-195.

[157] Wilson, "Teaching Young Adults," 196.

how she manages the death of a family member, the challenges of a marriage and a

young child, budgeting money, and every other area of life.

At FirstNLR, one of the main changes following the "drive" with Pastor Loy was

the introduction of "Class Pastors." Class Pastors are volunteer lay leaders who lead a

specific graduating class.[158] They commit to mentoring students from sixth grade through

the college years. Staff pastors support these leaders and facilitate this connection.

Additionally, students were encouraged to engage in ministry areas outside of youth

ministry. Rather than keeping students and young adults siloed in separate ministries,

students are encouraged to become active in other aspects of church ministries. By young

adulthood, a student has multiple connections to youth staff, Class Pastors, children's

ministry leaders and young adult leaders. These interlaced connection points create a

stronger mesh to keep young adults.

Peers Who Reach Across

Relationships are central to young adult life. Peer groups become the basis of

authority structures in young adult lives. Peers reach across to each other to maintain

connection. Not surprisingly, sixty-eight percent of churched young adults and forty-five

percent of unchurched young adults identified the opportunity to receive advice from

people with similar life experiences as very important.[159] Social interactions during the

young adult life stage are vital. Picnics, movie nights, meals after services, and other

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[158] My daughters have class Pastors. Morganne, Class of 2020, is led by Pastors Mike and Amanda Smith. Bethany, Class of 2024, is led by Pastors Shelby and Leigh Thomas. Their impact is beyond my ability to effectively express. I am grateful for their investment in my family.

[159] Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 128.

activities have a place in young adult ministry. The activity itself is not as important as the relationships developed during it, as forty-five percent of connected young adults identified personal relationships, not programs, as the reason they are involved.[160] These peer connections are vital to keeping young adults connected.

Millennials reject artificial hierarchy. They do not care if the best idea for the company comes from the janitor or the CEO; their goal is for the organization to be successful.[161] Young adults should be given the opportunity to lead. Peer leadership is essential. While non-young adults serve as mentors and guides, our young adult group is young adult led and young adult driven. Allowing young adults the opportunity to lead is essential for the long-term health of the church. Our young adult ministry is a laboratory of leadership where individuals develop. In the last twenty years at FirstNLR, my young adult leaders have since become pastors, missionaries, board members, discipleship group leaders, church staff members, and a host of other positions. Their peer leadership benefited those they lead, but also helped them prepare for future leadership roles.

Healers Who Reach Around

In the middle of their complex migration, young adults need a loving community to embrace them. Their broken, burdened souls need restoration. In a stress-filled world, they need healers. A welcoming and affirming ministry is essential to keeping young adults. Reaching around young adults requires expressions of affirmation and relentless patience. Words of affirmation, celebration of positive steps, and genuine care convey the

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[160] Rainer and Rainer, *Essential Church,* 115.

[161] Pardekooper, *Millennial Leadership,* 70.

sincerity of our feelings towards young adults. Saying "I love you," and meaning it, is imperative in young adult ministry. Nearly three-quarters of young practicing Christians say there is someone in their life who encourages them to grow spiritually.[162] Healers beat back voices of self-doubt and condemnation as they are vocal champions, the loudest encouragers, and affirming friends. The power of touch cannot be ignored. Studies showing the lowering of stress is accomplished through personal touch and words of affirmation prove this importance. While James may have had something different in mind, when the elders of the church lay hands on the hurting, they embody this important principle.[163]

Reaching around young adults takes relentless patience. We care about them more than the inconveniences their gaps of maturity create. Complex migration, critical distancing, and society's secularization may make it difficult to "get our arms around" young adults, but healers do it anyway. A meshed ministry carefully holds young adults close.

We began a "grandparents" ministry with our students and young adults. Young adults have great respect for older generations that have lived successfully.[164] For several years, Forrest and Barbara Hurd, both in their eighties, were some of my best volunteers. He was one of the greatest young adult encouragers. Forrest regularly attended the young adult service to sit with unchurched young adults, to buy them gifts, and to listen when

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[162] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 56.

[163] James 5:14.

[164] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 59.

they needed it most. When Forrest died, his funeral was attended by people in their twenties.

Sages, leaders, mentors, peers, and healers are valuable interlaced parts of meshed ministry. These combined parents, young adult pastors, friends, ministry partners and as many other interlaced structures as possible, provides a strong support. The meshed network maintains integrity and connection with young adults.

Elastic Shaping

Mesh fabric comes in a variety of types. "Power mesh" is a type of mesh most often found in shapewear and valued for its elasticity.[165] Power mesh flexes while keeping strong fabric integrity to protect the wearer. This specific mesh fabric is useful for foundational pieces of garments worn in active settings and for body shaping. Meshed learning environments are elastic providing non-restrictive shaping of young adults into lifelong followers of Jesus. The secular world has robbed many young adults of biblical information. The self-segregated world poorly models dialogue and respectful interactive learning. Elastic, shaping learning environments are accomplished through non-restrictive dialogical methodologies, biblical learning, and life skill development.

Non-Restrictive Dialogical Methodologies

Young adults migrating through ideological positions on culture, spirituality, and faith have doubts and questions as they become more self-aware. Meshed environments

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[165] Boris Hodakel, "What is Mesh Fabric: Properties, How its Made and Where," Sewport, October 30, 2020, https://sewport.com/fabrics-directory/mesh-fabric.

shape the spiritual formation of young adults as they safely express doubts and critically distance through non-restrictive dialogical methodology. Instructional methods built on top-down pedagogical models fail young adults. Meshed learning environments are firm and shaping, not rigid and forceful. Dialogical methods where individuals freely share germinating concepts appeal to burgeoning vocational awareness. Articulating feelings about theology, justice, society, and sexuality enables refinement and implementation of those beliefs. As *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry* points out, "In a cohort or community marked by the authenticity of sharing doubts, failures, and hunches, we can begin looking at the right questions, the kind that will connect deeply with the faith of young adults today. We can listen and point to the ways that faith (and its unsettling sister, doubt) becomes real."[166] Our elasticity testifies to the fact we can expand to the needs of those God has given us to guide, yet still maintain our integrity. A lack of openness to questions is one of the main reasons young adults walk away from church.[167] Church leaders who force their beliefs or silence divergent questions alienate young adults and subvert the awakening of their inert vocational abilities.

Biblical Learning

Secularity's impact on young adults has resulted in churched young adults becoming increasingly ignorant of biblical truths. Confusion regarding the gospel message and the story of God's redemptive work necessitates an environment for biblical

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[166] Mark DeVries and Scott Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry: Making it Work, Making it Last* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 159.

[167] In the Barna Group's research *Faith that Lasts Project*, five of the six reasons why young adults leave church are directly related to the church's reticence to discussion.

learning. Meshed ministry creates learning environments that facilitate the spiritual growth of young adults. An elastic, shaping learning environment focuses on Jesus-centered biblical learning. Teaching and preaching should be oratorically captivating and pass on to young adults sound, biblical doctrine.[168] It calls young adults to biblical faith and taps into the spiritual hunger of young adults.

Using the story of Jesus found in the Bible as the basis for teaching counteracts the bias and distrust of church structures. The ethical and moral teachings of the Bible are more than just great suggestions. They are a radical, healthy approach to life. The Scriptures are the starting place, the soil, the conversation partner, the intellectual and moral spouse of a young adult.[169] Rooting the experience of the young adult in Scripture helps them migrate the ambiguities of a changing culture. Biblical stories can be told with freshness as they have never been heard before.

Contemporary issues facing our world find resonance in the biblical text. Lessons on biblical young adults such as the disciples, Esther, David, Daniel, and Timothy speak to their life stage. Discussion of the failures, questions, and doubts of individuals like John the Baptist and Peter affirms their same journey. The Sermon on the Mount advocates for individual human rights and the importance of helping the oppressed. Jesus' parables of the Good Samaritan and the Book of James attack class prejudice. The book of Romans is more than a masterful work of theological reflection, is a treatise on

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[168] Douglas A. Oss, "Teach, Able to Teach," *Enrichment Journal*, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 41-42.

[169] David McDonald, *Then. Now. Next.: A Biblical Vision of the Church, the Kingdom, and the Future* (Jackson, MI: Westwinds Community Church, 2017), 63-64.

self-segregated ethnic discrimination in the church. Old Testament prophets such as

Micah, Isaiah, and Amos give young adult activists a biblical basis to fight injustice.

Almost ninety percent of unchurched twenty- to twenty-nine-year-olds said they

would listen if someone wanted to tell them about Christianity.[170] We must engage the

nine out of ten who are wanting to discuss Christianity. A meshed ministry does this by

using biblical stories of young adults, using Scripture to engage contemporary issues, and

addressing controversial issues. The *Connected Generation* has valuable insight into what

keeps young adults engaged in church:

> What brings these 18-35-year-olds with a record of regular attendance into their place of worship? Regardless of their religious climate, most indicate a desire to deepen their spiritual knowledge, a reason that is especially popular in nations that are or were influenced by Christianity. Growing in faith (65% Christian climates, 50% secular climates, 46% multi-faith climates) or learning about God (63% Christian climates, 47% secular climates, 37% multi-faith climates) top the list of motivations.[171]

Life Skill Development

After years of young adult ministry, the majority of questions I am asked centers

on practical life skills. Young adults ask, "Can you help me buy a car? Fill out my

FAFSA, do my taxes, or build a budget?" more than theological questions. How to raise a

child is more important to a single mom of twenty-three than whether the seven days of

creation are literal or figurative. A meshed ministry learning environment offers young

adults practical life skill development during their complex migration.

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[170] Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 37.

[171] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 64.

The Christian community assists young adults in shaping their vocational dreams and becoming unique individuals. We help them discern the shape of their callings in light of their gifts, the needs of the world, and the structures of opportunities around them. As they pursue their new vocation, they need guidance and counsel: "The Christian community if it intends to call and support young men and women in negotiating their ways to vocation will need to provide images and communal encouragement to resist both the panic and the seductions of the spirit that come from a society."[172] Vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which describes the goals of an individual and encompasses all the God-given talents for this purpose. This is exactly what young adults are searching for regardless of whether they are Christian or not. What better place to ask these questions and to discover their God-given gifts other than the church?

Leaders need to provide guidance on real-world issues like raising children, dating, marriage, and relating to parents. Addressing essential skills like job skills, banking, making large purchases, and other practical life skills are helpful. Every year in our Transitions, a class for college-aged young adults, topics such as these are covered in a series called "Adulting." Experts from the church community teach practical life skills. Realtors discuss how to rent the right apartment or buy a home. Car dealers share on car purchases. We teach lessons on budgeting, college applications, obtaining insurance, resume building, and many other areas. These lessons seem unrelated to spiritual development; however, young adults need them. Leaders position themselves as credible sources in a chaotic world by providing guidance for real-world problems.

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[172] Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 118.

Breathable Sanctuaries

Fabric's breathability describes its moisture vapor transition rate (MVTR). Mesh fabric has a high MTVR making it more comfortable for the wearer. Mesh allows the body to cool to during times of heat through its increased MTVR and less restrictive environment. Breathability in popular culture refers to a situation free from pressure and the ability to move around. A sanctuary is a place of restoration, a safe haven free from conflict. In the Christian tradition, sanctuaries are associated with the holy presence of God.

Meshed ministry establishes breathable sanctuaries for young adults. This modality moves the conversation away from aesthetic manipulations to gospel terraforming. It creates sanctuaries of respite in a world assaulting young adults with complexity and change. These sanctuaries do not replicate the caustic platforms of a hate-filled world but invite young adults to come, discuss, and share. Young adults live in a chaotic world of mounting pressures. Externally, the world around them is increasingly smaller, secular, self-segregated, and stressed. Internally, young adults are migrating through the emergence of the executive ego while untethering themselves from prior influences. Young adults need sanctuary in the midst of such stress. In their secular world, they need a sacred sanctuary. In their stressed world, they need a peace-filled sanctuary, in their self-segregated world, they need an inclusive sanctuary. In their smaller world, they need a collaborative sanctuary. These layered sanctuaries become "Edens" in the midst of dystopian chaos.

Sacred Sanctuaries

Meshed ministry fosters sacred spirituality. The secular world's disenchantment (removal of the supernatural) creates a hunger for the sacred.[173] This void of spiritualty causes young adults to desire to catapult out of their immanent frame and encounter a divine transcendent force to establish meaning. A stress-filled world is catalyzed by what philosopher James K. A. Smith called the "the ghost of God," whose "haunting" adds more uncertainty and questioning. The secular world did not eliminate God completely from an individual's consciousness. God's "ghost" creates metaphysical angst and an unexplained desire for the transcendent.[174] The haunted secular young adult searches, often unknowingly, for something greater than their own existence. A sacred sanctuary cultivates sacred practice (liturgy) and sacred intimacy (transcendence) filling the dearth created by secular and stressful influences.

Corporate spiritual practices, or liturgies, are heart-shaping experiences for believers. These harness the spiritual power of habit and provide respite for the soul in a secular storm. Sacred sanctuaries bring young adults back to the eucharist, Scripture reading, prayer, and other forms of spiritual ritual. As Leonard Sweet said, "the word ritual is at the heart of spirituality."[175] As a Pentecostal, these expressions are foreign to our faith practice. Yet, young adults find sacred resonance and renewed interest in these traditional faith expressions. Praying "St. Patrick's Breastplate" before singing the

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[173] Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 67.

[174] Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 4.

[175] Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 266.

modern worship song it inspired or hearing patristic instructions on the Eucharist during communion have been well received.

Sacredness describes a sense of awe, an other-worldliness. We do not just give platitudes and PowerPoints but serve as ushers into God's presence and are stewards of sacred liturgy. Smith says, "The drama of redemption told in the Scriptures is engaged in worship in a way that makes it 'stick.' Study and memorization are important, but there is a unique, imagination-forming power in the communal, repeated and poetic cadences of historic Christian worship."[176] Sacred sanctuaries help young-adult faith stick through these awe-full practices.

Sacred sanctuaries facilitate divine intimacy for young adults. It is our sacred trust to curate these encounters for them. Only God can transform the lives of young adults. Sacred moments trump strategic plans. Prophetic empowerment beats cultural analysis. Divine transformation should be pursued over creative instruction. When young adults leave, their testimony should be they met with God, not us. In the secular world, the ghost of God haunts them. In our sacred sanctuary, the Spirit of God transforms them.

Inclusive Sanctuaries

A self-segregated world isolates itself through caustic rhetoric. While the world is smaller because of digital connectivity, loneliness is at epidemic levels among young adults. Self-segregation and self-isolation compete with principles of biblical community and inclusiveness. Meshed ministry integrates young adults into the fabric of community.

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[176] James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 84.

Inclusive sanctuaries celebrate differences, integrate the marginalized, and cultivate

relationships.

While churches have used the concept of assimilation to describe church growth,

meshed ministry does not celebrate homogenized indoctrination. Instead, unique

differences are celebrated as we encourage young adults to share their positions through

civil discourse. Inclusive sanctuaries do not allow bully pulpits or the degradation of

others. Value is conferred when individuals are allowed to express themselves in a civil

manner. Meshed ministry groups do not demand uniformity but strive for unity even in

disagreement. David McDonald writes,

> Church provides space for us to engage those most unlike us, with mental or
> physical impairments, from differing socioeconomic backgrounds, across genders
> and ages. Church is the last place where civility reigns between those of different
> political convictions, tribal allegiances, or educational awareness. The church of
> the future will be characterized by diversity across all spectrums. She will be
> more of a salad than a melting pot, celebrating every ingredient for their unique
> contribution.[177]

Meshed ministry does not skew towards universalism or pluralism. It presents the gospel

and calls people to commit to Jesus Christ but does so carefully.

In these moments, those on the margins are given permission to contribute. The

minority position is given freedom to be expressed and integrated into the whole. Meshed

ministry follows the advice of Byron Klaus: "There's not much I can do to remedy the

current world communication slugfests. However, I can be part of a renewed effort by

Christians to offer society an example of civility where we listen, speak carefully and

with conviction, yet refuse to enter into verbal warfare to destroy someone whose

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[177] David McDonald, *Then. Now. Next.,* 94.

perspective on life differs from our own."[178] We have to show how to speak to each other and make efforts to integrate marginalized people into our ministries moving them from the "margins" into our midst. Several churches have modeled this using mission statements like, "church for the rest of us" or the signs posted at church that say, "Welcome Rabble Rousers and Rebels" and "Welcome Misfits and Miscreants."[179] Inclusive sanctuaries are created by inclusive leaders who make those outside their circle feel welcomed, pulling people into a shared goal.[180]

Inclusive sanctuaries pull isolated individuals into relational community. Relationships cannot be forced upon people, but they can be facilitated. While young adults need more than social activities, they cannot be neglected. Meshed ministry connects young adults to each other through shared meals, small group interactions, and other activities. Leaders, both mentors and peers, watch for isolation trends among young adults. While young adults need to critically distance during their migration to adulthood, they cannot completely withdraw.

Meshed ministry purposefully promotes diversity by integrating the marginalized. Niche ministries targeting subgroups can unwittingly reinforce self-segregational tendencies. Today's young adults desire multi-cultural experiences. The Kingdom of God presented in the New Testament is a picture of heterogeneous peoples from every tribe

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[178] Byron Klaus, *And That's the Way I See It! Reflective Commentary on Contemporary Issues from Byron D. Klaus* (Springfield: Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2014), chap. 4, sec. 3, Kindle.

[179] David McDonald, "A Church of Misfits," *Art. Work. Faith.* (blog), accessed October 27, 2020, http://doctordavidmcdonald.com/a-church-of-misfits. And "Church for the Rest of Us," Epic Baltimore Church, accessed October 27, 2020, https://epicbaltimore.com/#new-home.

[180] Rod Loy, *Help! I'm in Charge: Stuff Leadership Experts Didn't Tell You* (Springfield: Influence Resources, 2019), 177.

and tongue.[181] Our groups reflect this same diverse, missional ethos – inclusion of all. It will take intentionality and time to incorporate groups on the margins. They will fear advances towards them based on past experiences, but the resulting mosaic assemblage will be worth it.

Peaceful Sanctuaries

No single issue in the research of the current young adult predicament stands out more than the impact of stress and anxiety. The stressed world of young adults is a perfect storm of secular pressures and self-segregation. In this stressed world, churches should be places of peace. In the complex migration of young adulthood, we need to offer young adults stability, not chaos. One of our greatest gifts to this generation can be a depressurized space of acceptance and tranquility. Peace-filled sanctuaries are achieved by providing genuine, compassionate care. Our sanctuaries also assist the stressed individual to understand what is happening in their lives and help them to cope with stress and manage the healing process.

If fidelity to our spiritual calling is the code of our biblical mandate, then surely the code of our interaction is faithful service to the command to love others as we love ourselves. With only one-third of young adults feeling deeply cared for by someone around them, the church has an opportunity as well as a command.[182] Genuine care and compassion has positive results in the lives of young adults. Those who are meaningfully connected to a weekly church service exhibit less anxiety than those who do not

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[181] Revelation 5:9-10; 7:9.

[182] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 18.

consistently attend a church service.[183] Love and care are not manipulative strategies;

they are the essentials of ministry. While love is not a strategy, its necessity is clear.

Among unchurched adults, fifty-eight percent of younger adults (ages eighteen to twenty-

nine) are more likely to attend church if people at church cared for them and forty-three

percent identified relational natures (caring, accepting or enjoyable to be with) of their

leaders as what made their churches effective.[184] It is imperative churches become caring

places where leaders reach around young adults providing certainty in a time of

uncertainty.

Collaborative Sanctuaries

In response to a smaller, globalized world meshed ministries develop sanctuaries

of collaboration. Young adults desire connectivity and want to make a difference in the

world. While sanctuary suggests a reprieve from the world, collaborative sanctuaries

motivate people to reenter the world to make a difference. Collaborative sanctuaries are

not retreats from the world, but united advances into the world. Gatherings become

"send-ings." The time spent worshipping together is time spent working together. This

forces leaders to rethink the purpose and design of their ministry interactions.

Collaborative sanctuaries provide young adults synergistic access, heuristic opportunities,

and catalytic empowerment.

Synergy, the combined impact of collaboration, empowers young adults to reach

beyond themselves. A meshed ministry leverages the collective desire to do something,

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[183] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 50. Twenty-two percent of respondents who experienced anxiety attended a place of worship weekly compared to thirty-three percent of those who did not.

[184] Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 56.

and to do something with others. Sixty-six percent of churched young adults rated the opportunity to meet others' needs (locally and globally) as extremely important in their lives, and forty-seven percent of unchurched young adults said the same.[185] *Growing Young*'s survey found nearly sixty percent name service practices, missional practices, or generally being outward-oriented as what makes their church effective.[186] A collaborative sanctuary brings young adults and worldwide needs together, empowering young adults.

Many young adults lack access to the altruistic opportunities they seek. A study of young adult activism revealed while young adults express desire, very few actually consistently volunteer in ongoing involvement.[187] They want to be more involved, but do not act on the desire or do not have an avenue to do so. By creating synergistic access, collaborative sanctuaries enable young adults to fulfill their desires.

International missionary work and community engagement are not strategies but our identity as a young adult group. Our young adults have given to plant churches in Tanzania, Iran, China, and Bolivia. Locally, our young adults are frequently challenged to do more and given opportunities to do so. We work with organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Dorcas House (a home for abused women), Hillcrest Children's Home (a local foster care group), P.A.T.H (a local organization helping trafficked women), Share Your Lunch feeding program, and many more. Serving together as a team is as attractive as the activity itself.

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[185] Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 111.

[186] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 242.

[187] Konstam, *Emerging and Young Adulthood*, 78.

Collaborative sanctuaries enable heuristic learning opportunities for young adults. Heuristic learning is experiential learning. An individual's participation provides opportunities for nontraditional and multisensory learning. The hands-on, or better yet, the hands-with, approach enables young adults to put information into practice rather than theoretical spiritual platitudes. Collaborative orthopraxy moves "caring for the poor" from a lecture to a workday at Habitat for Humanity. It moves "loving your neighbor as yourself" from the pulpit to the soup kitchen. Service projects are learning projects where lessons are codified through group discussions. This kind of experiential learning and worship are attracting young adults in many churches today. God's word clearly indicates every follower of Christ is given responsibilities along with gifts to accomplish those responsibilities. We empower young adults to be active in the Kingdom of God.

Collaborative sanctuaries do not just connect young adults, they inspire them to make a difference. Leaders who inspire and motivate young adults catalyze empowerment. We speak to their self-doubt, pushing them to believe in themselves. Churches should be places of inspiration offering young adults hope, not fear. "I believe in you," needs to be four of the most common words we speak into the lives of young adults especially for those who lacked early leaders who did. The church can rise to the occasion and replace these lost voices.

When I met Alanna, she lived with her grandmother. The cycle of poverty and drug use ran deep in her family. Yet, she was determined to be different. Despite mistakes and setbacks, she finished college and began work in the non-profit world. After she married, she and her husband came to my office. They were overwhelmed by debt, a tight budget, managing a blended family, and a host of other stressful issues. After

coaching them through some tough decisions, I did my best to communicate my belief in them and their ability to succeed. If they remembered nothing from our time together, I wanted them to remember I believed in them. On March 7, 2017, Alanna posted on her Facebook wall:

> My name is Alanna! I'm a grateful believer in God and I'm a survivor of a dysfunctional family that struggles with anxiety. Sometimes, I get a questioning look when I introduce myself this way. My mother and father were addicts and my grandmother had dementia. Throughout my childhood and teenage years all of them were in and out and I stayed here and there. The horrible disease of addiction and mental illness caused so much pain and sadness throughout my life. I mean it when I said I survived through this. I have anxiety as well but I managed to graduate top of my class in high school, graduate college while supporting a newborn with no student loans, keep a job, not go to jail, or become an addict myself. I survived because a seed was planted in my heart at age 12 about the hope God offered and at age 15 that seed took root and grew but I didn't tend to it like I should have. At age 21, I was given a second chance and came back to God and he started working on pruning the decay from my feeble vines that remained…[188]

I am so thankful I have been in Alanna's life since she was twelve years old. I am thankful I was able to offer her hope, not fear. I am thankful we created a place that inspired her to become who God called her to be. I am thankful I was able to say over and over again, "I believe in you."[189] Make your ministry – your life – an exercise in inspiring people. When you inspire them and give them opportunities to impact their world around them, the outcomes are exponential.

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[188] Alanna Tatum, "My Name is Alanna! I'm a Grateful Believer in God," Facebook, March 7, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/alanna.tatum/posts/10154230534476922.

[189] Alanna if you are reading this, never forget, I believe in you.

Conclusion

I have had numerous conversations with church leaders about starting or revitalizing their young adult ministry. These conversations revolve around the same topics: worship or communication styles, relevance to young adult culture, room aesthetics, discipleship resources, services vs. small groups, or similar programming issues. While well-intentioned, leaders often missed the more important foundational components of young adult ministry. Young adults need a transformative encounter with the divine more than superficial replications of pop-culture gilded in spirituality. In the words of Barna Research, "When young adults engage with a community of worship, they're looking for concrete teaching, opportunities to fight injustice and friends to join them along the way."[190]

Transformative, attrition fighting ministries are accomplished through adaptable engagement, interlaced structures, elastic shaping, and breathable sanctuaries. In their secular, self-segregated, smaller, and stressed world this assists young adults migrating through the complex transitions of their life stage while keeping engaged with church. As they critically distance, meshed ministry critically engages with breathable elasticity, assisting spiritual formation and shaping of the young adult. Building the mesh should not be stopped because it feels too large or hard. It is a multi-year process filled with setbacks and moments of momentum.[191]

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[190] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 17.

[191] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 46.

Leonard Sweet was thirteen-years-old when his pastor called and asked him to be the church organist. Overcoming all of Sweet's objections, Dr. Snow said, "your church needs you."[192] Could effective young adult ministry be as simple as us saying to a generation mired in complexity and assaulted by uncertainty, "your church needs you?" Could our relentless communicated need for young adult presence be the mesh that keeps them close when they distance? Strategies and practicalities change, but the church's need for young adults cannot. I pray Sweet's story will be replicated a hundred-fold:

> "Even after I deconverted from Christianity at age seventeen and spent the next six years in the liminal swamplands of atheism, Marxism, and other "isms" (which were really embolisms), what kept me tracking with the stream of Christianity? Despite my doubt and disbelief, every Sunday I was immersed in the truth of the gospel and the community."[193]

Let us strive to build adaptable, interlaced, elastic, and breathable environments. Let us immerse young adults in the truth of the gospel. Most of all, let us make sure every young adult knows, "your church needs you."

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[192] Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 129.

[193] Sweet, *From Tablet to Table,* 132.

SECTION 4:

ARTIFACT DESCIPTION

The artifact is a Meshed Ministry website for young adult ministry. Resources are available on the website www.yaministry.org. These materials are available to download for free and reflect the Meshed Ministry model. The resources are posted on the following main pages:

- The Young Adult – understanding young adults and their situation

- Meshed Ministry –the principles of Meshed Ministry

- Leading Young Adults – resources on ministry to young adults

- Young Adult Curriculum – original lessons designed for discipling young adults

    Resources include: podcasts, articles, tools and teachable lessons. Podcasting was chosen as it is a popular medium among young adults and is free to use by them. Podcasts will be distributed through multiple channels via Podbean podcasting software (https://meshedyoungadults.podbean.com/). The articles are popular expressions of the material presented here in a less academic tone. The curriculum page contains 52 lessons of biblical principles and topics important to young adults designed for multiple uses by young adult leaders.

    Websites such as these gain followers and impact by balancing the initial release of quality content and delaying release of new content. For the purposes of this project, an initial posting of 3 months of material will be available January 2021. More content will be released on a scheduled release described in the Artifact Specification Section.

SECTION 5:

ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

GOALS

Goal #1   Provide a popular expression of the Meshed ministry model for young

adult leaders to implement in a church setting.

Goal #2   Provide easily accessible young adult ministry resources from multiple

voices.

Goal #3   Provide young adult ministry resources for the Assemblies of God.

Goal #4   Assist churches in retaining young adults.

AUDIENCE

The website audience is young adult ministry leaders. It will be marketed to the

Assemblies of God young adult ministry leaders' network but not denominationally

specific.

SCOPE AND CONTENT:

The Meshed Ministry website will release content throughout the year 2021.

Items with an asterisk will be available on website launch in January with the rest

released per the schedule in the Appendix. A brief summary of future posting content is

also found in the Appendix.

PAGE ONE: THE YOUNG ADULT

Podcasts:

      1.1 Today's Young Adult Situation*

      1.2 Why do Young Adults Leave the Church?

      1.3 Their World is Secular, Smaller, Self-Segregated and Stress (March 2021)

      1.4 Complex Migration

      1.5 Generation Z/Millennials

      1.6 Critical Distancing and Executive Ego

      1.7 Young Adult Stressors

      1.8 Vocational Stress

Articles:

1. Young Adults and Church Attendance*

2. Generation Z/Millennials*

3. Faith Development in Young Adults*

4. Complex Migration into Adulthood*

5. Other Young Adults Resources*

6. Managing New Relationships

7. Helping Someone Living on their Own

8. Struggling Through the Holidays

PAGE TWO: MESHED MINISTRY

Podcasts:

      2.1 Young Adult Ministry in the Local Church*

2.2 Starting a Young Adult Ministry*

2.3 Young Adult Ministry Essentials*

2.4 What I Wish I had Known When I Started*

2.5 Dialogical Teaching and Biblical Learning

2.6 Sanctuaries for Young Adults

2.7 Adaptable Engagement and Interlaced Connectivity

2.8 Leading Students Back to School

2.9 Surviving the Holidays

Articles:

1. I'm Starting a Young Adult Ministry – What's First?*

2. Sustainable Young Adult Ministry Resource*

3. You've Started – Now What?*

4. Collaboration Opportunities*

5. MAYA - What Young Adults are Looking for in Church*

6. Communicating with Young Adults*

7. Mentoring Young Adults*

8. Intergenerational Ministry

9. Graduation Connections

10. Recruiting Team Members

11. Managing New Relationships

12. Avoiding Burnout as a Leader

13. Preparing for the Next Year

PAGE THREE: LEADING YOUNG ADULTS

<u>Podcasts:</u>

    3.1 Sarah Brown – "I Am a Young Adult"*

    3.2 Shelby Thomas – "Mentoring Young Adults"*

    3.3 Richardsons – "The Secular Campus"*

    3.4 Gabe Lyons – "The Next Christians"*

    3.5 Raymond Donaldson – "I am a Young Adult 2"

    3.6 Chi Alpha - "Campus Ministry"

    3.7 Josiah Kennaly – "Young Adult Ministry Trends"

    3.8 Marvin Civil – "African-American Young Adults"

    3.9 George Wood – "Politics and Religion"

    3.10 Rod Loy – "Young Adult Ministry in the Overall Church"

    3.11 Len Sweet – "The Future of ministry"

    3.12 David McDonald – "Curating Creativity"

    3.13 Carling Futterer "I am a Young Adult 3"

    3.14 Rose Whitfield "I am a Young Adult 4"

<u>Resource Reviews:</u>

1. Batterson's *Chase the Lion* *

2. Elmore's *Generation Z**

3. Powell's *Growing Young**

4. RightNow Media*

5. Smith's *Souls in Transition*ent*

6. Chan's *The Book of James**

7. DeVries' *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*

8. Barna's *Connected Generation*

9. Smalley's *Marriage Intensive*

10. Skit Guys Resource

11. Kennealy's *Reaching the Next*

PAGE FOUR: YOUNG ADULT CURRICULUM

Twelve 4-week lessons created for a leader to teach.

1. Daniel – Godly Living in an Evil World*

2. Dating – Check Yes or No*

3. Moolah – Using Money Wisely*

4. Worship – A Life of Worship

5. Ruth – Home is Where Your Heart Is

6. Sermon on the Mount – Simple Living in a Complex World

7. Gideon – Get in the Fight

8. Marriage – Get it Right Before You Start

9. Christmas – Living Nativity

10. Ecclesiastes – Finding Meaning in Life

11. Philippians – Smile, You're Going to Make It

12. Esther – Your Purpose, God's Plan

BUDGET

FirstNLR underwrote the costs of this artifact. The following is a list of actual expenditures for this website:

- www.yaministry.org domain with GoDaddy: $20.17/year

- Podbean podcast per year: $108/year

STANDARDS OF PUBLICATION

Comparable websites include www.gospelcoalition.com and www.youth.ag.org Articles should be created in appropriate standards associated with web publishing. While not academic in nature, they will contain documentation where needed. Podcasts should be less than 15 minutes in length, recorded with high quality and clarity, and available on popular podcasting distribution channels (Apple, Google, Amazon, Pandora, and Listen Notes). Curriculum examples will be created in an easily downloadable format (Adobe Acrobat). Standard formatting of lessons ensures ease of use and understanding for users. Curriculum is original to the author.

POST-GRADUATION CONSIDERATIONS:

In 2015, Dr. Chris Railey oversaw young adult ministry for the Assemblies of God. It was one of many ministry areas he led. Young Adult ministry was not a top priority. Over the years, I served as a resource liaison for young adult ministry through his department. After discussing my work, he agreed to allow my artifact to become the denomination's young adult ministry website.

Once work began, denominational leadership wanted to exercise control of content. Dr. Railey and I chose to put this partnership on hold. After I completed my work, I would allow them use it as they wanted. Dr. Railey left his position in 2020 and new leadership is in place. We plan to meet in early 2021 to discuss if this is still desirable.

Over 900 individuals are a part of the Young Adult Ministry Leaders Facebook Forum. I am a regular contributor and advisor on this private page. Some of these have expressed interest in this project and I will be marketing it to them. In March 2021, they will host a training conference where I will present on Meshed Ministry and make this resource available.

I believe the principles of Meshed Ministry have the potential to be a solid book for young adult leaders as very few resources exist on this subject.

SECTION 6:

POSTCRIPT

I was a young adult when I began working in young adult ministry. Today, my daughter is a young adult. Over the course of time, I've observed the human condition is much more uniform than individuals want to admit. Each generation believes it is the first or the only one to experience certain things. While true to some extent, the young adult predicament is not as unique as those experiencing it might think. This is why I'm drawn to Fowler's Faith Development Theory as a balance point to situational forces exerted on young adults. The migration into adulthood is complex, but it is not always uncharted complexity. The settings change, cultural influences shift, technology enhances, but humans consistently fall into developmental patterns and churches can anticipate these and minister to young adults in the midst of the migration. During my research and creation of this artifact I tried to remember the purpose of the exercise – developing lifelong followers of Jesus connected to the local church.

The Artifact's Development and Efficacy

The Artifact's medium started as a DVD-Resource but soon became a web-based portal. This reflected technological shifts during the research period. At first, I envisioned (more hoped) this resource could be monetized and used to help further my ministry. I soon shifted to an open-source free model. The retention of young adults was much more important than profitability. Additionally, what began as more of a writing project became a podcast as this is a preferred learning method. Ideally, the website attempts to

achieve a both/and approach where written and recorded material complement each other. Again, technology and audience preference created the shift in delivery methods.

While the artifact is designed for church-based ministry to young adults, I believe the information crosses over to other solutions as well. Campus ministries, church plants and anyone else working with young adults can take the information and appropriate it to their local ministry context. It remains to be seen what part of this resource will be the most important to leaders. Will it be the curriculum for teaching? Will it be the training components on ministry and culture? It is too early to tell. Whichever is most used, I hope all is robust enough to add value.

Artifact's Impact on Me

In developing materials for local church use, I learned content is more important than method of delivery. If I am too committed to the method, I miss the best way to get the content to the most people. While I have created content for my local church context, adapting it for broader use forced me to evaluate more closely.

"Will this be used by others?" caused me to take fewer short cuts and be more thorough in my development. In my own ministry, understanding the unique nature of our current secular world (Smith's Secular-3) has been very helpful. Reading Taylor and Smith challenged me to think differently about young adult secularity.

Future Research

Young adult ministry will continue to change with the passage of time. During my writing, I was led to new research questions I hope others will take up. As it relates to retention, the church would benefit from an analysis of campus ministry graduates'

integration into the local church. Corollary to this, a study of campus ministry and local churches that work together could create a model for others to replicate. Another important research project would be an analysis of the true impact of the "none's" in American life. As I demonstrated, there is debate on the veracity of these reports. Some argue there is not an increase in those who do not practice faith, but less hesitancy to admit they do not. Rather than using anecdotal support, a research project on this and the impact of choosing no religious affiliation would be helpful.

New Opportunities

In the process of research on learning environment, a dearth of materials on life-skills from a biblical perspective was discovered. Individual resources can be found on individual subjects like budgeting, parenting, marriage, etc. but a curriculum or training tool for the local church on faith-based life skill development is something I would like to pursue. This generation's resonance with social justice must be married to ideals of biblical justice. Helping young adults navigate the biblical motivations for engaging in the improvement of society would be of interest to me. Doing this without sacrificing moral imperatives of scripture would be a helpful asset to church leaders. I feel this artifact is the start of a valuable resource for young adult leaders. Meshed ministry is important to the church and to the young adult. This artifact assists the integration of this ministry into a local church.

APPENDIX A:

CHURCH ATTENDANCE IS A NECESSARY PART OF THE FAITH JOURNEY

Is church attendance a necessary component of life for a young adult? Is it a valid indicator of an individual's healthy spirituality? Should churches be concerned about the lack of attendance of young adults? The answers are emphatically yes. Participating in a faith community is a basic component of the life of a follower of Jesus Christ. In the American context, this is most commonly seen through involvement in local church life. Scripture indicates that participation in church life is a vital part of the development of a follower of Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3; Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:25). In this section, I will define "church" based on Scripture, show how Scripture uses figurative language with community dimension to describe church, identify the pattern of God's people gathering for worship and discipleship, and how Scripture presupposes a church setting for spiritual practices. This study of scripture validates the claim that participation in church life is a necessary part of the faith journey of young adults.

Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church." Scripture uses the term "church" to refer to a physical structure where believers meet, a local group of believers (church), and all believers worldwide (Church). Scripture's use of the word church is more nuanced and specific. Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* defines Church as "the community of all true believers for all time."[194] The word "church" originated from the Greek word *kuriakos* which means "belonging to the Lord." While *kuriakos* is only used twice in the New Testament (1 Cor. 11:20 and Rev. 1:10), it became significant in

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[194] Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 853.

early Christianity as the designation for the places (church) where the Church gathered.[195]

The Church is the embodiment of the Kingdom of God on the Earth, while a church is a

specific subset of believers who identify together because of proximity and affinity.

Scripture uses several words to describe the gathering of believers for spiritual

expression and worship. Jesus' declaration in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church…"

is the first of over one hundred uses of the word *ekklesia* to describe the people of God.

Εκκλεσια is a compound word from the preposition *ek* meaning "out" and the verb

καλεο meaning "to call." This denoted the *ekklesia* as a group of individuals called out

or assembled for a specific purpose. While there are examples of secular uses, the

majority of the New Testament use of this term has a sacred application referring to those

whom God has called out of the world of sin into the fellowship of Christ.[196] This word

is also used to describe the people gathered to worship and serve the Lord.

In the Septuagint (LXX) *ekklesia* was used to translate the Hebrew word *qahal* as

assembly, convocation or congregation. The Bible's use of *qahal* and the LXX's use of

ekklesia point to gatherings of individuals together for religious purposes. As mentioned

earlier *kuriakos,* "the people belonging to the Lord," also refers to the church.

Paul wrote his letters to a visible group who were together in community:

"to the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2); "to the church of the

Thessalonians" (1 Thess. 1:1); "to Philemon…and Apphia…and Archippus…and the

church in your house" (Philemon 1-2).[197]

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[195] Stanley M. Horton, *Systematic Theology* (Springfield: Logion Press, 1995), 527.

[196] Ephesians 2:19.

[197] Grudem, *Systematic Theology,* 856.

Paul's use of *ekklessia* and *kuriakos* indicates that he viewed these as specific visible groups who gathered together. These visible groups ranged from a small group of people meeting in private homes (Romans 16:5) to the larger groups of believers meeting together referenced above. Paul Minear identifies as many as eighty different New Testament terms used to establish the meaning and purpose of the church.[198] Many of these images reflect a community dimension such as the "Body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12; Romans 12:5), the "people of God" (Lev. 26:12; 2 Cor. 6:6; Deut. 10:15; 1 Peter 2:9-10), or the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 3:11). Ephesians 2:19-22 describes the church as a temple or house consisting of individual members making up individual parts of a greater whole. Jesus describes His relationship to the disciples as His family (Mark 3:34-35). Bodies, people, temples and families create an image of interdependent members existing together.

Scripture reveals a pattern of God's people gathering together for the purpose of worship and discipleship. In the Old Testament this takes place during prescribed, ritualistic worship, as well as occasional gatherings for specific purposes. In Genesis 4:1-5, the first family worshipped together at an altar, each son bringing a sacrifice. In Genesis 9, God communicates His covenant to both Noah and his sons. In Genesis 35, Jacob and his family built an altar to the Lord. The Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle during the Exodus were where Moses and the children of Israel interacted with God. The Temple established under Solomon's reign, became a dominant religious image in the life of Israel. The Ark of the Covenant, representation of God's presence in Israel, was

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[198] Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 173.

located in the Temple in Jerusalem. Sacrifices of atonement, worship and thanksgiving

took place in the Temple. Israelites from across the region were required to travel to the

Temple in Jerusalem. In addition, the synagogue became an important part of the life of a

Jewish believer. The synagogue was a place where the Torah was read (Luke 4:16-21),

and instruction was given by a speaker (John 6:59; Acts 13:13-52). It was Paul's custom

to use a synagogue as a base for his ministry in new communities.

The New Testament church gathered together on the first day of the week.[199] In

Acts 20:7, Paul gathers together with the believers for communion and preaching. Acts 2,

Acts 4 and Acts 15 all refer to Christians gathering together. In these meetings, they pray

together, solve challenges, receive teaching and contribute their own resources for the

good of the church. In 1 Corinthians 11 – 14, Paul gives instructions on how believers are

to worship together through communion and the proper use of the gifts of the Spirit. One

of Paul's clearest statements about the gathering of Christians together is found in 1

Corinthians 14:26, "Well, my brothers and sisters, let's summarize. When you meet

together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God

has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said. But

everything that is done must strengthen all of you."

In addition to the above examples, Hebrews 10:23 – 25 says, "Let us hold tightly

without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise.[24] Let

us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.[25] And let us not

neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially

now that the day of his return is drawing near." The writer warns against neglecting

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[199] 1 Cor. 16:2.

meeting together. The benefit of gathering together is that it enables believers to motivate one another and affirm each other in holding tightly to the hope we have in God. Participation in church life is not just a good idea for followers of Jesus, it is a matter of obedience. Scripture gives instructions to Christians to be active in gatherings of believers. The writer of Hebrews does not give a caveat to the young adult years. While this pericope does not specifically address young adult church attendance, it does address the young adult situation in regard to church life participation. Even though some young adults have given up meeting together, let us encourage them to meet together. From the first family, through the teaching of Paul a pattern of God's people gathering together for religious purposes is clear.

Scripture does not give specific guidelines on the exact composition or functions of these gatherings, but we can see the importance of participating in these faith communities from other portions of Scripture. It presupposes a community setting for many of the instructions on how believers interact with each other (i.e., church leadership, church discipline, the use of gifts of the Spirit, the ordinances of the church, prayer for each other and ministry to each other).

Paul establishes a clear leadership structure for how a local community of believers should operate. In Ephesians 4:12 and 1 Timothy 3:1-12, Paul identifies teachers, pastors, elders, and deacons who seem to all have a leadership role in a local community of believers. Their leadership takes place in the context of a gathering. Jesus teaches in Matthew 18, that the church should be involved in church discipline. An offending brother who will not reconcile must be brought to the church. Paul echoes this teaching in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. In 1 Corinthians 12 – 14, Ephesians 4 and in Romans

12, Paul lists the gifts of the Spirit that are to be at work in the church. Many of these gifts must be expressed or actualized in community. For example, the gift of prophecy, gift of helps, gift of service, gift of teaching, gift of leadership and the gift of administration all presuppose a community dynamic for expression.[200] The local church is the community of believers where these gifts take place. The ordinances of the church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, both occur when believers gather together.

Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:8, "In every place of worship, I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up to God…" James 5:13-15 indicates that the church would be the place where elders would pray for those who are sick. We are to encourage one another, comfort one another, and bear one another's burdens.[201] While these can be done individually, they are better facilitated in a group setting.

In conclusion, Scripture explicitly and implicitly states the importance of an individual participating in church life, uses group images to describe the church, and presupposes a corporate gathering for many of the spiritual practices commanded in Scripture. From this we can argue the importance of church attendance and participation. We cannot excuse a pulling away from the church during the young adult years. While working at a Christian liberal arts college in the Midwest, it was my responsibility to work with students who were in crisis or facing academic or behavioral issues. Without exception, every student I counseled with indicated that in the weeks surrounding their discipline issues, their church attendance had decreased. Whether this lack of attendance was a cause or an effect, the association between life crisis and lack of church attendance

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[200] Rom. 12:6 -8; 1 Cor. 12:10 -28; Eph. 4:11.

[201] 1Thess. 4:18; 2 Cor. 1:3-4; Gal. 6:2.

still remained. Faith that is not practiced is lost. Participation in a local body of believers

is a foundational component of being a part of the body of Christ. While its expression

may vary by denomination or background, participation in fellowship with other

believers is important. The abandonment of participation in church life is usually the

precursor to an abandonment of faith.

After studying the Biblical imperatives and models for church participation in the

life of the believer and answering the question as to whether or not young adult retention

is a problem for the church, I make the following observations. First, religious expression

or practice (church attendance, involvement in a faith group, corporate prayer) is a good

indicator of internal faith as well as necessary part of the faith development of all

Christians. Secondly, over two-thirds of young adults who made decisions for Jesus

Christ in student ministry are no longer serving Christ in the context of a local church one

year after high school graduation. When these things happen, young adults drift in their

faith commitment. At the very time they are attempting to define their values and ideals

for the rest of their lives, they are absent from the faith community that can best help

them answer these questions.

APPENDIX B:

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE REVIEW

These writings have influenced the development of the meshed ministry presented. For each, I briefly summarize the resource, critique its contributions, and identify the key concept influencing Meshed Ministry approach.

Intentional Focus on Jesus from *Growing Young*

Fuller Youth Institute published its study of two-hundred and fifty churches engaging teenagers and young adults who were growing spiritually, emotionally, missionally, and sometimes numerically in the book *Growing Young*.[202] While all organizations naturally grow older, these churches intentionally grow younger. *Growing Young's* research revealed six core commitments a church needs to grow young: (1) Unlock keychain leadership. Instead of centralizing authority, empower others – especially young people. (2) Empathize with today's young people instead of judging or criticizing; step into the shoes of this generation. (3) Take Jesus' message seriously. Instead of asserting formulaic gospel claims, welcome young people into a Jesus centered way of life. (4) Fuel a warm community. Instead of focusing on cool worship or programs, aim for warm peer and intergenerational friendships; (5) Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere; and (6) Be the best neighbors by enabling young people to treat others well.[203] Every church did not evidence all six commitments, but, in

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[202] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 19. The churches surveyed a menagerie of denominations, size, ethnicity and locations.

[203] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 43.

their words, "tended" to do so. Researchers were quick to point out their conclusions were about correlations, not causations.[204] The order of focus or intensity of presence for each of these was different from church to church. However, *Growing Young* claimed the "pursuit of Jesus is the overriding motivation" and the centrality of a Jesus-focused message in a Jesus-focused community is the heart of these churches. [205] The intentional decision to grow young while not sacrificing the centrality of the gospel message is this book's biggest contribution.

Build Resilient Systems from *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*

Sustainable Young Adult Ministry was written by Mark DeVries and Scott Pontier who have worked for years in young adult ministry. They identify six mistakes they've made in reaching young adults then offer ideas on why they made them. The strength of this book is not in its ministry insights but the fresh honesty about the difficulty of young adult ministry and the importance of resilience and their transparency. The weakness of *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry* is it spends little space discussing ministry implementation. While practical ideas are offered, they do not discuss how to start a young adult ministry until page 168 of a 193-page book. Even then, it refers the reader to a short appendix called "Young Adult Ministry Road Map." It identifies the stages of ministry development: (1) Prepare for the journey; (2) Engage your traveling companions; (3) Learn the Landscape; (4) Try a few excursions; (5) Pack your bags; (6) Plan your trip; (7) Launch your Journey; and (8) Sustain highlighting the steps to take.

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[204] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 18.

[205] Powell, Mulder, Griffin, *Growing Young*, 44-45.

DeVries and Pointer are more concerned about mindset and philosophy of young adult ministry than their methodology.

Before starting a young adult ministry, DeVries and Pontier suggest a daunting task for a church. As part of Stage One: Prepare for the Journey, they suggest an aggressive planning strategy. Before mission and purpose can be articulated, fifteen administrative systems must be established to ensure success.[206] If that isn't enough, each system also has multiple components. The average church and church leader will balk at that list. Most young adult ministries are volunteer led and driven, so, while helpful, this seems insurmountable.

After such a harsh critique of their work, why do I include them as an important contributor to young adult ministry conversation? The book builds the strongest case for building a resilient, sustainable ministry system to young adults. *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry* bucks the trend of most young adult resources who subtly imply disorganization as a value of ministry. Young adults reject over-programmed, institutionalized structures; however, church leaders still need to build sustainable systems.[207] I wish they had been more detailed in their descriptions of young adult versions of database management in fluid cultures, budgeting, creation of forms and goals, etc. I have included in the artifact portion of this dissertation some of the tools they created.

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[206] DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry,* 134 – 136. The systems named are: volunteer, visioning, discipleship, evangelism and mission, compliance, database, communication, hospitality, calendar, regular programming system, major event, innovation, integration, financial, and marking/outreach system.

[207] DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry,* 132.

Create Meaningful Experiences from *Essential Church*

Thom and Sam Rainer's *Essential Church* addressed the issue of young adult attrition by studying American eighteen- to thirty-year-old adults who had dropped out of a Protestant church after high school. They concluded young adults no longer saw church as essential to their lives. Churches wanting to keep young adults, need to become essential to their lives through a four-phase model. First, essential churches *simplify* – they develop clear structures and process for making disciples. Rather than complicated incoherent, strategies, they are on a simple, identifiable mission for disciple making. Secondly, essential churches *deepen* – they are grounded in solid biblical teaching. They resist the temptation to chase "dumbed down" versions of the gospel. Third, essential churches *expect commitment* – they ask members to commit to church participation. Finally, essential churches *multiply* – an outward focus drives its members to reach people for Jesus Christ.[208] An essential church demonstrates to young adults the church is essential to their lives no matter what situational changes they go through.[209]

One of the most important discoveries in *Essential Church* was the importance of the Senior Pastor to young adults, as fifty-eight percent left because of pastor or church-related reasons.[210] They believe church leadership is the linchpin for cross generational discipleship. As the primary leader, the pastor sets the perceived value the church places on people in general and young adults specifically. The implications for senior leadership in the local church are obvious, leaders must make intentional effort to connect with

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[208] Rainer and Rainer, *Essential Church,* 6.

[209] Rainer and Rainer, *Essential Church,* 6.

[210] Rainer and Rainer, *Essential Church,* 115.

young adults before and during young adulthood. Secondly, longevity is a key asset for a leader. In a church culture where the average tenure of a senior pastor is less than five years, it is not surprising young adults are struggling to stay connected. Rainier's work calls for churches to deepen their impact on young adults and provide meaningful experiences spiritually and relationally for young adults.

Lead Young Adults from *Generation Z: Unfiltered*

Tim Elmore leads Growing Leaders, an organization working with leadership development for decades. Growing Leaders is connected to the John Maxwell School of Leadership. It comes as little surprise Elmore leans heavily on the responsibility of mentors and leaders in helping young adults. His purpose is "furnishing the tools for you to offer life giving leadership."[211] *Generation Z Unfiltered* is not a young adult ministry primer, but it is helpful in providing a positive leadership framework for challenges young adult leaders face. The strength of this resource is in the specific guidance Elmore has for the individual challenges. What sets this resource apart from others mentioned is its focus on leadership dynamics and the heart and mind of young adult leaders. Meshed ministry embodies the adaptive, supportive and responsive attitudes Elmore's ideal present. The intentional decision to embrace a generation and guide them to self-confidence without dictating the outcome is the passion of Elmore. Yes, leverage social media and join the passionate discourse around essential issues of Generation Z, but do it, not to become their savior and hero, but as guide and activator. Help connect this

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[211] Elmore and McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered,* 52-53.

generation to each other in healthy ways while paving the road for their success and calling them to ethics and values their zeitgeist works against.

Young Adults Are Lonely, but Open from *Connected Generation* and *Faith for Exiles*

Over the last few decades, the Barna Group has studied trends and developments in the church world as it relates to young adults. In 2019, they published companion works – *The Connected Generation* and *Faith for Exiles* focused specifically on the spiritual belief practices of young adults. These works are complimentary and will be analyzed together. The *Connected Generation* presented curated data from the research. *Faith for Exiles* offers ministry applications based upon that data.

The *Connected Generation* is the published results of a study conducted with World Vision which surveyed over 15,000 young adults in 25 countries over a ten-year period. The *Connected Generation* identified one commonalty among survey respondents: "all have at least one thing in common in addition to their age: an internet connection."[212] Additionally they report six other young adult findings related to this. First, despite their hyper-connected and global mindset, they are *Connected but Alone.* Secondly, they have greater *Spiritual Openness* towards spirituality, religion, and, at times, the church.[213] Third, worry and insecurity related to finances and vocation are so prominent they label this as the *Age of Anxiety*. Fourth, perplexed by human suffering and

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[212] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 6.

[213] They point out this is not always true of individuals who left the church, a group they call prodigals. For reasons already covered in this dissertation, it is obvious why those who have left, are less open to church engagement as those who were never there to begin with. The important thought here is young adults are surprisingly open to spiritual things. Secularity is losing its grasp in many arenas.

conflict (top issues creating spiritual doubt), they are a group *Looking for Answers*. Fifth, across religious groups there remain faithful young adults who keep and deepen their faith because of strong spiritual formation enabling *Resilient Discipleship.* Lastly, the connected generation is *Longing to Make a Difference* by engaging with a community of worship where they find concrete teaching, opportunities to fight injustice and healthy relationships.[214]

At various points, I have engaged with the *Connected Generation*'s research. However, several findings are worth noting here. Even though this group is labeled the "connected generation" they consistently identify themselves as lacking in relationships with only one-third saying they often feel deeply cared for by someone around them.[215] Unique to this study was their conclusion family engagement was essential for faith involvement. Personal family bonds are necessary for fulfillment and emotional health. This is being seen in the first generation of Millennial parents who are prioritizing their children's whole well-being.[216]

Regarding spiritual practices of young adults, they reported over half (fifty-seven percent) felt religion was good for people and more than half of these attended religious services on a monthly basis (thirty-one percent once a week, fourteen percent a few times a month, and seven percent once a month).[217] Despite this positive report, not all their findings are as encouraging for Christian leaders, as young adults believe present-day

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[214] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 16-17.

[215] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 24.

[216] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 31-36.

[217] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 60-61.

Christianity teaches the same basic ideas as other religions.[218] They discovered a network

of spiritual connections is a major factor in young adult faith involvement. Specifically,

relationships developed in the teenage years were foundational to practicing faith in

young adult years.[219] Young adults who participated in church life did so because of the

need for personal spiritual development.[220] While relationships are important for young

adults, spiritual development consistently remains the reason they stay involved. This

development takes place both in-person and in a digital environment.

Faith for Exiles builds on this premise by narrowing focus to young adults still

engaged in church, whom they call "resilient disciples." Using the imagery of the

children of Israel living in Babylonian captivity, it calls churches and individuals to live

as exiles in the digital Babylon of today. They challenge faith communities to develop

structures maximizing these exiles' experiences as they create resilient discipleship

infrastructures. Rather than analyzing why young adults left, they examined those who

stayed engaged, remained committed to biblical truth, and believed the world could be

changed through Jesus Christ. They are convinced there is hope for young adults and the

church: (emphasis mine):

> Our research shows that, in the face of a coercive, spirit-depleting, screen-obsessed society, cultivating the following five practices helps to form resilient faith. Again, these are not simple formulas; they are guidelines and guardrails for the formation of the soul. Think of these as the spiritual scaffolding around a young soul that enables the Holy Spirit to access the life inside, or the trellis that supports a growing disciple's branches as their roots sink deep enough to sustain them. Practice 1: To form a resilient identity, *experience intimacy with Jesus*. Practice 2: In a complex and anxious age, *develop the muscles of*

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[218] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 72.

[219] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 80.

[220] Barna, *The Connected Generation*, 92.

cultural discernment. Practice 3: When isolation and mistrust are the norms, *forge meaningful, intergenerational relationships*. Practice 4: To ground and motivate an ambitious generation, *train for vocational discipleship*. Practice 5: Curb entitlement and self-centered tendencies by *engaging in countercultural mission*. These five practices summarize a *decade of work, research, thinking, and listening* to discover hopeful ways forward.[221]

Faith for Exiles calls the church to action. Kinnaman points out the ease at which most American young adults identify as Christian, "It turns out that calling oneself a Christian represents a very low bar. About two out of three eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in the US say they are Christian (a notable statistic, given all our hand-wringing about the rise of the nones)."[222] For the resilient disciple, faith is not defined by ascribing to the label Christian but is characterized by a deeply spiritual experience with Jesus Christ. Churches have not called for a deep enough commitment of its young followers and an important component of their long-term engagement is the expecting more out of their faith commitment.[223] The exemplar young adult believers are engaged in spiritual practice, often from their middle school years. They believe they are actively working with other Christians to help Jesus transform the world. They are best able to do this when the church has given them the tools necessary to live cross culturally and assist them in articulating a countercultural, biblical worldview.[224] They point out many churches struggle to help young adults in "wisdom for living" categories of instruction and mentoring specifically in areas of technology and sexuality and there is a need for to

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[221] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 34-35.

[222] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 40.

[223] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 51.

[224] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 56-57.

create learning communities of young adults.[225] Finally, these resilient disciples want to use their gifts and talents to make a difference in the world and for the Kingdom. These young adults believe they have a divine mission and ninety-four percent strongly agree they want these gifts and talents to honor God.[226]

Putting these resources together, meshed ministries are intentionally focused (*Growing Young*), build resilient systems (*Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*), create meaningful experiences (*Essential church*), strategically lead young adults (*Generation Z*), and are hopeful and calming for an anxious and lonely generation that is open to spirituality (Barna Research). There are numerous other young adult resources available, but these have contributed to the development of meshed ministry the most. They dictate the modalities and the activities of the meshed leadership. Consistent in all of these works is the necessity of intentional engagement of young adults. Leaders create environments of spiritual experience that maintain system integrity while young adults push against boundaries. We create a network, a garment, strongly resilient reinforced by its redundant connections.

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[225] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 90.

[226] Kinnaman, *Faith for Exiles*, 146.

APPENDIX C:

ARTIFACT

This Appendix is organized in the following manner:

(1) Meshed Ministry Content Release Strategy

(2) Screenshots of the Meshed Ministry Website (www.yaministry.org)

(3) Screenshots of the podcast site

(4) Sample articles from the Meshed Ministry Website

(5) Sample Curriculum from the 52 weeks

Meshed Ministry Content Release Strategy

Below you will find the release dates of all website content. For content that is scheduled for release at a future date, a brief description for each is provided. Please visit www.yaministry.org for the other resources.

JANUARY 2021 - LAUNCH

PAGE ONE: THE YOUNG ADULT

Podcasts
1.1 Today's Young Adult Situation

Articles:
1. Young Adults and Church Attendance
2. Generation Z/Millennials
3. Faith Development in Young Adults
4. Complex Migration into Adulthood
5. Other Young Adults Resources

PAGE TWO: MESHED MINISTRY

Podcasts:
2.1 Young Adult Ministry in the Local Church
2.2 Starting a Young Adult Ministry
2.3 Young Adult Ministry Essentials
2.4 What I Wish I had Known When I Started

Articles:
1. I'm Starting a Young Adult Ministry – What's First?
2. Sustainable Young Adult Ministry Resource
3. You've Started – Now What?
4. Collaboration Opportunities
5. MAYA - What Young Adults are Looking for in Church
6. Communicating with Young Adults
7. Mentoring Young Adults

PAGE THREE: LEADING YOUNG ADULTS

Podcasts:
3.1 Sarah Brown – "I Am a Young Adult"
3.2 Shelby Thomas – "Mentoring Young Adults"
3.3 Richardsons – "The Secular Campus"
3.4 Gabe Lyons – "The Next Christians"

Resource Reviews:

1. *Chase the Lion*
2. *Generation Z*
3. *Growing Young*
4. *Right Now Media*
5. *Souls in Transition*
6. *The Book of James*

PAGE FOUR: YOUNG ADULT CURRICULM

Daniel Series – Godly Living in an Evil World
Dating Series – Check Yes or No
Moolah – Using Money Wisely

Each week a new website resource will be released on the following schedule:

FEBRUARY 2021

Week 1   Page One Podcast 1.2 Why Do Young Adults Leave the Church
This episode evaluates the situational and ideological reasons why young adults leave the church. Expanding on dissertation findings, the podcast analyzes relevant data for churches.

Week 2   Page Two Podcast 2.5 Dialogical Teaching and Biblical Instruction
This episode uses the dissertation information to discuss what dialogical teaching looks like. An emphasis on the importance of biblical instruction will also be presented.

Week 3   Page Three Podcast 3.5 Raymond Donaldson "I am a Young Adult"
Raymond is a 28-year old African-American young adult. He shares about struggles he has faced as a single black male and ways the church can connect with him and his friends.

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum: Worship Series: More Than A Song
Using Psalm 139, Psalm 46, Psalm 51 and Psalm 23 this series looks at worship as a life experience, not a moment in a service. Worship is more than a song, but a lifestyle. Each week worship principles and challenges are presented.

MARCH 2021

Week 1   Page One Podcast 1.3 Their World is Secular, Smaller, Self-Segregated and Stressed
In this episode, the Secular, Smaller, Self-Segregated, and Stressful worlds of young adults are discussed. In each part, young adult leaders are given tips on how to best lead people in these times.

Week 2   Page Two Article - Intergenerational Ministry with Young Adults
This article talks about the importance of having integrated ministry leaders of various ages in young adult ministry. Older leaders serve as sages, mentors and guides during this period of life.

Week 3   Page Three Resource Review: *Souls in Transition and Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*
This is a review of the books Souls in Transition and Sustainable Young Adult Ministry

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum: Ruth: Home is Where Your Heart Is
This 4-week curriculum uses the book of Ruth to talk about importance of sacrifice, redemption, doing the right thing and coming back from failure. Each week is a character study of Ruth, Boaz, Naomi and the unnamed man of Ruth 4. This series sets up great discussions of caring for the poor as well as what to do when things go wrong.

APRIL 2021

Week 1   Page One Podcast 1.4 Complex Migration
This episode covers material about the complexity of the migration into adulthood. Using the material from the dissertation, complex migration is seen as stage of life with multiple influences and triggers.

Week 2   Page Two Podcast 2.6 Sanctuaries for Young Adults
This episode discusses the need to build breathable sanctuaries for young adults. Sanctuaries that are sacred, inclusive, collaborative, and peaceful.

Week 3   Page Three Podcast 3.6 Chi Alpha "Campus Ministry"
This episode has a group of Chi Alpha campus ministry leaders talking about reaching young adults on the college campus.

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum: Sermon on the Mount: Simple Living in a Complex World
This four-week series on Jesus' sermon in Matthew covers topics such as forgiveness, prayer, humility and how we treat others. The world is complex and layered, but Jesus calls us to simple living.

MAY 2021

Week 1   Page One Podcast 1.5 Generation Z/Millennials
In this episode, we talk through the differences between Generation Z and Millennials. Tips on how to best work with and minister to each generation are offered.

Week 2   Page Two Article: Graduation Connections
As high school and college graduations take place, this article talks about the importance of connecting with young adults at each one.

Week 3   Page Three Resource Review – Smalley's Marriage Intensive
This is a review of the Marriage Intensive Program by the Smalleys

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum – Gideon: Get in the Fight
This four-week curriculum looks at the story of Gideon in the book of Judges. It calls young adults to stop hiding from responsibility, to stop resisting God, to stop doubting themselves and to stop doing things their own way. Using the portions of Gideon's story often over looked, this is a call to engagement with our God given responsibilities. It is time to stop hiding and get in the fight.

JUNE 2021

Week 1   Page One Podcast 1.6 Critical Distancing and Executive Ego
In this episode, we discuss James Fowler's concepts of critical distancing and the establishing of executive ego. Using these developmental realties in young adults for spiritual formation is important for a young adult leader.

Week 2   Page Two Podcast – 2.7 Adaptable Engagement and Interlaced Connectivity
In this episode, we discuss the importance of building a meshed ministry that adapts to engage young adults and is interlaced with sufficient support to keep young adults.

Week 3   Page Three Podcast – 3.7 Josiah Kennaely Young Adult Ministry Trends
This interview with Josiah Keannaely who is the young adult ministry coordinator for Minnesota Assemblies of God looks at developing trends in ministry to young adults.

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum – Marriage – Get it Right Before You Start
This four-week series on Marriage is designed to help existing couples with Communication, Crisis management, Developing Trust and Avoiding Relationship Killers.

JULY 2021

Week 1   Page One Article – Managing New Relationships
In this article, we discuss managing the new relationships young adults have with family and friends. Things change as they become young adults and managing these relationships take new skills.

Week 2   Page Three Review – Skit Guys and Barna's *Connected Generation*.
This is a review of the resource popular with young adult groups – "Skit Guys"
This is a book review of George Barna's Connected Generation.

Week 3   Page Three Podcast 3.8 Marvin Civil "African-American Young Adults"
In this episode, we interview Marvin Civil who is an African-American young adult leader working to reach young adults. He shares insights on ministry to African Americans.

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum: Christmas – Living Nativity
This holiday series is a character analysis of the Shepherds, Wise Men, Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Each week breaks apart the familiar Christmas story with attention to individual detail of these characters and practical application from their stories.

AUGUST 2021

Week 1   Page One Article – Young Adults and Parents
Continuing the article from the month before, this piece looks at the life of the young adult and their parents. This is a difficult time for parents and young adults. This article offers help in guiding them through this time.

Week 2   Page Two Podcast – 2.8 Leading Students Back to School
In this episode, we discuss the challenges of young adults going away to college. Going back to school creates new opportunities but comes with a sense of loss. Managing this is important for leaders.

Week 3   Page Three Podcast 9 George Wood "Politics and Religion"
In this episode Dr. George Wood discusses the delicate balance of politics and religion.

Week 4   Page Three Podcast 3.10 Rod Loy "Young Adult Ministry and the Local Church"
In this episode, Pastor Rod Loy talks about the importance of integrating young adults into the local church and how they are needed.

SEPTEMBER 2021

Week 1   Page One Podcast – 1.7 Young Adult Stressors
In this episode, we discuss the significant sources of stress in the life of a young adult. Coping with these stressors is a key part of leading young adults.

Week 2   Page Two Article – Recruiting Team Members
In this article, we discuss the importance of constantly recruiting team members. Tips and helps to recruiting them are shared.

Week 3   Page Three Podcast 3.11 Len Sweet "The Future of Ministry"
In this episode, church futurist Leonard Sweet is interviewed about what he sees on the horizon for the church and ministry.

Week 4   Page Three Podcast 3.12 David McDonald "Curating Creativity"
In this episode, Pastor David McDonald is interviewed about creativity and church life and ministry. He will discuss how to foster creativity and the opportunities his ministry has to help church leaders do this.

OCTOBER 2021

Week 1   Page One Article – Helping Someone Live on their Own
In this article, we talk about coaching tips for young adults who are living on their own for the first time.

Week 2   Page Two Podcast – Surviving the Holidays
In this episode, we share tips on how young adult leaders can survive the holidays. Balancing the opportunity for connection and protecting against exhaustion and burnout are key topics.

Week 3   Page Three podcast 3.13 Carling Futterer "I am a Young Adult 3"
In this episode, Carling shares about young adult life and experiences. She is a 20something divorced female.

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum – Ecclesiastes Finding Meaning In Life
Using the book Ecclesiastes, this four-week series covers the following topics: Finding meaning and purpose, dealing with frustration, surviving loss and failure and understanding fairness. This book of the bible is a natural fit for young adult angst and frustration.

NOVEMBER 2021

Week 1   Page One Podcast – 1.8 Vocational Stress
In this episode, we discuss the challenge stress of determining what career a young adult is supposed to choose. Leaders are giving ideas on how to guide the young adult and achieve outcomes without causing more stress.

Week 2   Page Two Article – Avoiding Burnout as Leader
In this article, we discuss how to avoid burnout as a leader. While depending on God for support and strength, the leader does what is in front of them with realistic expectations on themselves.

Week 3   Page Three Resource Review – Reaching the Next by Josiah Kennaely
This brand-new book is on Reaching the Next Generation. It will be reviewed.

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum – Philippians – Smile, You're Going to Make It
This four-week series on the book of Philippians covers the topics of contentment, joy in adversity, growth in hard times, and the importance of a healthy community.

DECEMBER 2021

Week 1   Page One Article – Struggling through the Holidays
This article gives tips on mentoring young adults who are having a hard time with the holiday season.

Week 2   Page Two Podcast – Preparing for the Next Year
In this episode, strategies for planning an entire of discipleship and interaction are discussed.

Week 3   Page Three Podcast – 3.14 Rose Whitfield "I am a Young Adult 4"
Rose, a college aged young adult, shares challenges and thoughts on life as a young adult.

Week 4   Page Four Curriculum – Esther – Your Purpose, God's Plan
This four-part series covers topics such as anger/hate, knowing your purpose, the importance of doing what is right and how God uses a person.

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