

Young Adult Symposium

Franciscan Renewal Center

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Resources

Handouts/Resources/PowerPoint Presentations: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/young-adult-faith-formation.html>

Lifelong Faith Journal: Fall 2015 & Winter 2016 Special Issues on Adult Faith Formation. Available for free at:

<http://www.lifelongfaith.com/journal.html>.

Roberto, John, editor. *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*. Naugatuck: LifelongFaith Associates, 2015. (available at

www.LifelongFaith.com)

Key Features

1. Addresses the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of young adults in their 20s-30s: single, married, parents, and more.

- Exploring their identity: trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work, developing an individual sense of autonomy, and stabilizing a self-concept and body image
- “Tinkering”—putting together a life from the skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand
- Developing and maintaining intimate relationships with trust, love, and caring
- Transitioning from their family of origin toward establishing independence in living arrangement, finances, career, and other aspects of their lives
- Differentiating self without repudiating or replacing their family of origin—sorting out emotionally what they take from their family of origin, what they leave behind, and what they will create for themselves
- Developing a career and occupational identity and working to establish a work-life balance.
- Adjusting to the expectations and responsibilities of the “adult” world
- Committing to a marital partner, defining and learning the roles of married life
- Starting families and having children; establishing a new family with its own rules, roles, responsibilities, values, and traditions, and developing parenting roles and skills
- Engaging in a religious-theological reevaluation and, sometimes, reinvention

2. Address the diverse religious-spiritual identities among young adults today.

There is a spectrum of religious-spiritual identities (and corresponding needs): those who are religiously/spiritually committed and engaged in the faith community; those who are who are less religiously committed and participate occasionally in the faith community; those who have left established churches and religion, but are still spiritual and spiritually committed; and those who unaffiliated, uninvolved, and claim no religious identity.

Vibrant Faith and Engaged in the Congregation. A religious faith is central to the lives of the engaged. These are who are actively engaged in a Christian church, are spiritually committed, and growing in their faith. These are parents who are transmitting this faith to their children and are actively engaged as a family in a church community. These are children, adolescents, adults, and parents/grandparents who are spiritually committed and growing in their faith. They have found their spiritual home within an established Christian tradition and a local faith community that provides ways for them to grow in faith, worship God, and live their faith in the world. They are practicing their faith at home and in daily life.

Moderate Faith Practice and Occasionally Engaged in the Congregation. These are adults and families, children, adolescents, and parents/grandparents who participate occasionally in church life—in seasonal celebrations, sacraments and milestones, major events, and age-group programs. For parents transmitting a religious faith primarily means bringing their children to educational programs at church. Some may even attend worship regularly and send their children to religious education classes. Their spiritual commitment is low and their connection to the church is more social and utilitarian than spiritual. While receptive to an established church, they do not have a faith commitment that would make their relationship with God and participation in a faith community a priority in their lives. Their occasional engagement in church life does not lead them toward spiritual commitment.

Spiritual, but Not Religious. These are adults who are spiritually engaged (relationship with God, meaningful spiritual life), but involved in organized religion and an established Christian tradition. Some may join a nondenominational Christian church focused on their spiritual needs, while others may find an outlet for their spiritual hunger in small communities of like-minded spiritual seekers, in local or global acts of service, or in online spiritual resources and communities. The Spiritual but Not Religious reflect a growing minority of the American population, especially among young adults.

Unaffiliated. For the unaffiliated religion is not personally important in their lives (and their family's life). They are not affiliated with organized religion and established Christian churches. The Unaffiliated reject all forms of organized religion and reflect a steadily increasing percentage of the American population, especially among young adults. Many adults (Millennials and Gen X) left organized religion because they stopped believing in the religion's teachings (top reason) or their family was never that religious when they were growing up or their experience of negative religious teaching about or treatment of gay and lesbian people (PRRI research, 2016). Many parents are "first generation Nones" and are now raising their children in religiously uninvolved and unaffiliated homes creating a "second generation of Nones."

3. Be person-centered, not content- or program- or group-centered.

The content, experiences, programs, methods, and delivery systems need to be designed around the lives of the adults. While this may sound self-evident, it is not. Too much of adult faith formation is developed from a provider-centered, program-driven model where denominations, publishers, and churches determine and deliver the content and programming.

The days of the "one size fits all" mentality are over. We can no longer focus on how to get every adult to participate in a small faith sharing group or to come to the Lenten series or to study the Bible. Adult faith formation is no longer about finding *the* program to attract all adults. It is about addressing the diversity of adult learning needs with a variety of faith formation content, experiences, activities, programs, and resources.

4. Target and tailor ministry and programming to the lives of young adults.

Provide a **variety** of content, methods, formats, and delivery systems to address the diverse life tasks and situations, needs and interests, and spiritual and faith journeys of young adults.

- Provide a variety of experiences, programs, activities, resources, and social connections that are available anytime and anywhere, in physical places and online spaces
- Incorporate seven learning environments—self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world—in online spaces and physical places, to provide a variety of ways for people to learn and grow in faith that respects their preferred styles of learning, their life situations, and their time constraints.
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5. **Recognize that learning and growth is a process of active inquiry with initiative residing in the learner and that adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that adult learning activities will satisfy.**

Methods for Millennials

- microlearning and episodic learning experiences
- lots of activity-based group work
- fast-moving, interactive activities
- visual learning (images, videos)
- technology enabled learning using their own devices for learning
- collaborative learning environments with peer interaction
- entertainment and learning at the same time

6. **Guide young adults in discerning their spiritual and religious journeys and life stage needs, and giving people an active role in shaping their own personal trajectories of faith growth by personalizing and customizing learning and faith growth around their journeys.**

Personalizing faith formation is tailoring learning around each young adult’s strengths, needs and interests—including enabling choice in what, how, when and where people learn (grow in faith and discipleship).

7. **Incorporates digital methods and media to enhance and expand the ways young adults grow in faith.** Develop strategies for being digitally-enabled—blending gathered community settings with online learning environments and utilizing the abundance of digital media and tools for learning and faith formation; and digitally-connected—linking intergenerational faith community experiences, young adult peer experiences and programs, and daily/home life using online and digital media. The digital world has given us technologies and resources that allow us to build faith formation around individuals and groups with a particular spiritual or religious need, interest, passion, concern, or life issue. We no longer have to worry about reaching a “mass audience.”

Digital Faith Formation Strategies

- *Gathered using Online Content:* A gathered event or program that uses online content as part of the design of the event or program
- *Gathered with Online Content:* A gathered event or program that provides online content and activities to extend and expand the learning from the gathered program
- *Online and Gathered Content:* Online learning focused on presenting the content of the program combined with face-to-face, gathered sessions using active learning methods to discuss, practice and apply the content.
- *Mostly Online Content:* A mostly online program with opportunities for regular interaction in face-to-face, gathered settings
- *Fully Online Content:* An online program with all learning done online and limited face-to-face experiences

8. **Nurture communities of learning and practice around the shared interests, needs, life stages, and activities of young adults.**
9. **Design a network of relationships, content, experiences, and resources—in physical places and online spaces—that can offer young adults “playlists” of engaging and interactive content and experiences tailored to their needs and interests—all offered on a digital platform that makes it easy for adults to find and follow pathways for growth in faith.**

10. Develop missional outreach to the spiritual-religious needs and journeys of the “spiritual but not religious” and the “unaffiliated,” and creating pathways to experience the Christian faith, encounter Jesus Christ, and embrace the Good News.

11. Curate content, experiences, programs, activities, and resources from a variety of sources—especially online and digital media—and match the content with young adult needs and interests.

We are moving *from* an emphasis on developing religious content, designing and managing programming, and teaching/facilitating learning *to* designing faith forming environments, designing digital platforms for faith forming content, and curating religious content and experiences.

Practices from Research Studies

Best Practices for Reaching Young Adults

Perry Chang

(<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/best-practices-for-reaching-young-adults/>)

The emerging consensus of research regarding young adults shows a growing percentage of this age group is not connected with any religion, although many younger Americans express an interest in spirituality. This reality raises concerns about young adult participation in religious communities.

How are faith communities with a significant proportion of young adults distinctive? The Faith Communities Today research project has been studying congregations of all faiths across America that are doing an exceptional job of engaging young adults. A congregation is considered to have significant young adult participation if 21 percent or more of its participants are 18 to 34 years of age. Across all faiths, a total of only 16 percent of all congregations have such young adult involvement. The findings identify some best practices for congregations that wish to attract and engage young adults. These can be summarized in a dozen “do’s” and four “don’ts.”

What Congregations Should Do:

1. Offer a high-quality worship experience that is contemporary in style or refashion traditional worship in new ways.
2. Start a new congregation or young-adult-only worship group within an existing congregation, or move an existing congregation to a new location.
3. Prioritize metropolitan areas and communities near university campuses.
4. Allow people to bring coffee to worship.
5. Provide food.
6. Be intentional about reaching out to young adults.
7. Form friendships with young adults.
8. Involve young adults in leadership.
9. Sponsor activities that mix socializing with theological reflection.
10. Apply theological principles to everyday-life issues that young adults face.
11. Figure out how to connect with the different types of young adults — whether they are still in school or starting careers, single or married, with or without children. These groups cannot just be lumped together without some facilitating rationale.
12. Figure out how to connect with young adults who are aging out of the category in their mid- to late-30s.

What Congregations Should NOT Do:

- Be theologically doctrinaire.
- Insist that people wear dresses or suits and ties to worship.
- Expect growth in the number of members or total giving.
- Expect young adults to sign up for long-term committee work.

Lessons on Engaging Young Adults Effectively

Asa J. Lee

How can a congregation effectively engage younger adults? The **Faith Communities Today (FACT)** study provides some clues. The study focused on the active involvement of young adults in participating faith communities and involved a multi-year examination of ten congregations with a sizable presence of young adults between the ages of 18 and 35. These ten congregations were diverse in every aspect, including size, ethnicity, and faith tradition. These case studies and qualitative data revealed some key lessons in how to attract and engage younger adult populations.

Be intentional in engaging young adults. Congregations in the FACT study initiated programming with the intent to engage young adult populations in their surrounding contexts, whether urban, rural, or suburban. It was not haphazard or accidental. In the areas of worship, budgeting, service, or governance, these congregations were strategic in cultivating young adult participation and creating space for young adults to exercise their gifts. They displayed a willingness to “make room” for young adults and “envisioned” them into the life of the community. The churches sought input from young adults to plan, build, and implement programming for their age group.

Be true to yourself. Key to the intentional actions of these congregations was a strong sense of identity. The FACT study congregations discerned a role for young adults as part of their communal identity and found ways to enact that vision. In one of the churches studied, young adults attributed their involvement in the church to the congregation’s strong Roman Catholic identity. The young adults became deeply involved because they appreciated how the congregation lived out its values. Ultimately, the essential work of attracting and engaging younger adults requires congregations to recommit to their identity and the values that shape their communities.

Integrate, don’t assimilate. Vibrant congregations have a culture of “integration” as opposed to “assimilation.” The etymological root of assimilation means “to make alike,” while integration simply means be “part of.” A culture of integration rather than assimilation frees young adults from rigid conformity and allows them to be who they are. The congregations studied exhibited a form of inclusivity, a culture of integration that invites young adults to exercise their gifts and abilities in ways that best suit them. They accept young adults “as they are” and work deliberately to connect them to the broader community. Young adults feel welcome and report a sense that they have a place integral to congregational life. The resulting affirmation encourages participation from young adults in areas of visibility, including worship, faith formation classes, service activities, and governing committees. FACT contributor and religious researcher LiErin Probasco explained that these vibrant congregations “meet young adults where they are on their faith journey.” They embody a “come as you are” and “be what you will” attitude.

Offer challenging programs addressing real-life needs. Too often, church leaders provide younger adults what they think young adults want and need rather than what young adults really want and need. The FACT study revealed that vibrant congregations strategically invest in young adults in ways that build on their real needs, both spiritual and physical, and provide opportunities for growth. All of the congregations studied offered programs and worship that challenged young adults to grow in various aspects of their lives, but each congregation did this in a way consistent with its own values. These programs and activities were oriented toward creating community and faith formation. They offered fellowship and challenge. They accepted young adults and provided space for them to exercise their gifts in the community. They also equipped them to address the challenges of their lives.

Be innovative, not contemporary. Many congregations seek to be relevant to young adults with “contemporary” worship, language, or décor, while retaining traditional values. However, the FACT study reveals that being “innovative” may be more important than being “contemporary.” The difficulty with the contemporary mindset is that it can quickly become static, such as the many “contemporary” worship services that are stuck in the practices of the 1980s. Innovation refers to the readiness and adaptability of a congregation to address its present context for ministry. Innovation is characterized by a willingness to entertain the new and effective ideas for the sake of relevance. With innovation as a mindset, ministry is contemporary. An example from the study is the role of innovation and technology. Technology is not what makes ministry relevant, but innovation views technology as a vehicle to be relevant.

THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

Religion-like communities are bursting forth in unlikely places. Many such groups form and spread as if boundaries between religions did not exist at all. In fact, the constructed categories of what is 'religious' and what is 'secular' are no longer the most helpful ways to understand how we are gathering and making meaning of our lives.

Our previous report, *How We Gather*, profiled some of these communities—from CrossFit to Camp Grounded—which fulfill traditionally religious functions in the lives of unaffiliated Millennials. We found that young people experience meaning and belonging in makerspaces, co-working hubs, dinner parties, fitness boot camps, and fan communities. And though the organizations count themselves secular, they demonstrate elements of religious polity, liturgy, and even spirituality. In fact, many unaffiliated participants in these communities have not left religion behind; rather, they are finding religious life wholly outside of its institutions.

Our study revealed six themes that comprise the cultural DNA of this growing movement. These are key experiences that unaffiliated Millennials seek:



Community

Valuing and fostering deep relationships that center on service to others



Personal transformation

Making a conscious and dedicated effort to develop one's own body, mind, and spirit



Social transformation

Pursuing justice and beauty in the world through the creation of networks for good



Purpose finding

Clarifying, articulating, and acting on one's personal mission in life



Creativity

Allowing time and space to activate the imagination and engage in play



Accountability

Holding oneself and others responsible for working toward defined goals⁷

Yet this list is incomplete. There is a seventh theme. These groups reach for it in their manifestos about the power of being together and part of a greater whole. When we gathered 50 of their leaders, we heard them return again and again to the 'common thread,' the 'collective well-being,' and the 'circle that encompasses us all.'⁸ These fledgling communities are cultivating an experience for which they largely lack language. In fact, they are often startled by the gravity and attraction of what they find. Religious institutions have a powerful gift to share with them. Here we call it, Something More.



Something More

Reaching for what matters most