



NEXT IS NOW

**YOUNG ADULTS
BEYOND COLLEGE
MINISTRY**

SUMMARY

· Many young adults find this moment an exciting time in their lives as they start to live into life-long careers, deepen relationships, and more fully live into independent adulthood. Time and effort become more valuable to them, and they become more selective in who and where they invest themselves.

Vocation and Calling

· Young adults often have a strong personal faith sustained by individual practices. They crave an authentic community of other young adults with whom to curiously construct a deep faith of their own, but often have trouble finding such groups.

Faith Formation & Practices

· Young adults appreciate mentor relationships with people five, ten, or fifteen years older. These mentors offer insights on employment, relationships, and life skills helping young adults navigate the first few years of young adulthood beyond college. Mentors provide a ministry alongside young adults to help and encourage them.

Ministry Relationships

· Young adults want help in articulating personal priorities and values they seek in a local church congregation. Young adults express difficulty finding a church because college ministry creates unrealistic expectations. Young adults could use help to know what they want from the church as a core need, where they are willing to compromise, and what in church life is no longer essential to them.

Ministry Purpose

· Young adults want to be invited, equipped, and challenged to use their gifts for good. The church often overlooks young people and centers church on Sunday morning worship, which doesn't work in young adults' lives. Invest in the young adults already in church - they can often lead and will bring their friends.

Evangelism

KEY THEMES OF YOUNG ADULTHOOD



YOUNG ADULTS ARE MORE MATURE THAN MANY EXPECT

There is a broad spectrum of experiences (starting careers, studying in grad school, starting to have families) in the lives of young adults.



THERE IS AN IMMENSE AMOUNT OF CHANGE HAPPENING IN YOUNG ADULT LIVES

These changes excite young adults as they often feel they are making real progress in life. Yet, the interconnected complexity of all these changes can leave young adults struggling with self-doubt, trouble balancing life, and a desire for help.



YOUNG ADULTS CARE ABOUT FAITH, BUT ARE DRIVEN BY BUSY SCHEDULE

Young adults value church, but church life centered solely on the Sunday morning schedule does not work well in their lives. They feed their faith in other places and spaces.

KEY THEMES OF YOUNG ADULTHOOD



INDIVIDUAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICES SUSTAIN A CONNECTION TO FAITH

Time in nature, journaling, and using online devotionals are key spiritual practices of young adults. Young adults often center on practices they can do individually and state they find a sense of larger spiritual connection to God in these moments.



THEY ARE LOOKING FOR CHURCHES WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE

Young adults seek a faith community that articulates its values in word and deed. Young adults are not willing to compromise core values to be accepted by a church and are willing to hold space for difference. When given “take it or leave it”, young adults will leave it.



SELF-DOUBT IS A REAL STRUGGLE WITH MANY YOUNG ADULTS

They feel like they should have it figured out by now but still wonder if they are falling short.

THE KEY FINDINGS

Common Challenges expressed by young adults as they move into young adulthood after college and campus ministry include:

-  **A DRAMATIC SHIFT FROM COLLEGE TO THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD**
-  **DOMINO EFFECTS OF LIFE CREATED ANXIETY, STRESS, AND MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS**
-  **BUSY SCHEDULES WHERE TIME FEELS PRECIOUS**
-  **UNCERTAINTY ABOUT BASIC SKILLS SUCH AS INSURANCE, FINANCES, ETC.**
-  **REALIZATION THAT YOUNG ADULTHOOD IS THE NEW MIDDLE SCHOOL**

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

YOUNG ADULTS HAVE:

- **EXCITEMENT ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL IMPACT IN LIFE AND THE WORLD**
- **DEEPLY PERSONAL FAITH EVEN IF IT IS NOT A FOCUS**
- **A DESIRE AND WILLINGNESS TO FORM AN AUTHENTIC AND DIVERSE COMMUNITY**
- **LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND PASSION TO BE ENGAGED**
- **A PRESENCE IN MOST CHURCHES ALREADY, SO START WITH THEM**

KEY EMERGING THEMES

- ✿ **THEY ARE NAVIGATING NEW BOUNDARIES**
- ✿ **THE NEXT IS NOW**
- ✿ **MENTORING IS KEY AMONG YOUNG ADULTS**
- ✿ **THEY SEEK AUTHENTIC BELONGING**
- ✿ **THEY SEEK SAFE SPACE FOR FAITH FORMATION**
- ✿ **THEY WANT TO BE INVITED, EQUIPPED, AND CHALLENGED TO USE THEIR GIFTS FOR GOOD**

KEY EMERGING THEMES

NAVIGATING NEW BOUNDARIES

Many young adults express the stark shift from a college environment which, while diverse, is a community with many people the same age, all with the same experience as students, and concentrated in a similar area. Once young adults enter the next phase, it's harder to figure out the boundaries between professional relationships, acquaintances, friends, and more. In some ways, it's like the middle school of adulthood in its awkwardness. Yet young adults are often excited because they see their goals come into vision and are achievable.

THE NEXT IS NOW

For many young adults, the most exciting part of their lives is moving from a season of study and preparation to the next level of professional life. These next steps can be graduate school or starting a job. The next step can be about taking the next serious step in a relationship. The key is they feel this is the moment to start making decisions that will shape the next part of their lives. Things shift from a clear milestone and goal (graduating college) to a life-long project reflecting the authentic way God works in their lives.

MENTORS ARE KEY

Young adults expressed the key role that other Christians (beyond their pastors) have played in their lives. Young adults are looking for people in their 20s and 30s to help guide them through this time of life. Many times guidance comes from seasoned co-workers who adopt new young adults as they start their careers.

KEY EMERGING THEMES CONT'D.

SEEKING AUTHENTIC BELONGING

Young people are more selective in their friendships as they decide which people they want to invest in and which friendships they are willing to let go. They don't need more friends; they seek better quality friendships. Young adults are looking for meaningful relationships in a community where they are seen, valued, and can be their authentic selves. They are more interested in small group belonging rather than having membership in a large institution. Being a young adult can be lonely, so they want to be seen. Young adults often feel overlooked and undervalued. Finding a place of authentic community is really hard, yet deeply important, among young adults.

SAFE SPACE FOR FAITH FORMATION AS YOUNG ADULTS

Young adults often have a strong personal faith. They often discuss individual practices of podcasts, prayers, music, journals and conversations with God. Faith in God is an anchor, yet they need a brave space to bring questions to grow their faith. Many young adults have expressed church hurt and struggles with mental health. Young adults are wounded by church and society. A community that offers mental health resources in a healthy environment is important. People are ready for intimate, tender conversations.

INVITED, EQUIPPED, AND CHALLENGED TO USE GIFTS FOR GOOD

Young adults want to be included in positively impacting their local community and the larger world. Older generations value stability and length of service as belonging, while young adults see impact and engagement as belonging. They need a little help with space, resources, and encouragement, but young adults will surprise others with their ability to lead. Don't put them on committees to keep the old processes going; give young adults permission and support to try something new outside the church walls. Given the fragile finances of young adults, the church should proactively offer a small investment to support young adult ministry.



YOUNG ADULT COHORT GATHERING

Harvest Colab, in partnership with The 787 Collective, gathered a young adult cohort in March 2024 to offer additional insights related to research findings. Their voices are reflected on the following pages.



VOICES OF YOUNG ADULTS

Next is Now

When I think of "Next is Now," I think of chapters throughout our lives. Up until this point, I've been continually preparing for the next chapter. The scripture from Ecclesiastes makes me second-guess that. Now is a choice. The time has come.

We've been raised our whole lives to seek affirmation in the plan. The next step, the next milestone. How do we learn to be content with now and where we are at? How do we celebrate the current phase in life? I'm the happiest I've ever been at my job, and so fulfilled in grad school, but I'm still weighed down by where my future is going.

Now is gut-wrenching, lonely, and freeing. Stepping into my dream job, I anticipated challenges and struggles, but not in the areas where I have been facing these issues. Next is Now and it continues to come. I'm still navigating the grief.

Time is your friend, not your enemy. This isn't about making the right choice, but trusting God will help you be the right person wherever you're at.

Safe Space for Faith Formation

Jesus helped his disciples grow by asking questions. How can we continue to grow if we don't have a place and space to do so? Being vulnerable is scary! Finding the right people you feel comfortable with isn't easy as a young adult.

The church does not know how to create a space for young adults. I believe the church sees us as inexperienced and does not value what we are seeking, which is an intentional, honest, and genuine community. I believe this is key to this generation.

My most faithful friendships have come from outside of the church.

I recently started attending a young adult group. I realized I needed the gift of having conversations in a small group where I wasn't leading. Since this is only once a month, a ministry friend and I have been toying with the idea of starting something similar. God is present in the spaces we create for him, and that takes work sometimes.

VOICES OF YOUNG ADULTS

Navigating New Boundaries

You can't see the boundaries until you explore the limits of the new space. God is in the midst of those unknowns, and invites us to discover. I need to remind myself daily that I'm not in trouble for not knowing.

We have gone through life with peers the same age and the same experiences as us. This is no longer true. All people are now our peers. This is an awkward, hard, middle school transition, but there is also some degree of freedom. We're free to be friends with the 65-year-old widow, the 33-year-old new parents, and the 25-year-old postgraduate.

I was taught that my voice was important and valuable, but then we get into a world that doesn't often want to hear us.

Being at a place in life where you have friends having their third baby and friends having their third hook-up of the month, there is constant code-switching and different types of rapport. Being able to know who in your life has the capacity to hold what you're asking will help build lasting relationships and manage expectations.

Seeking Authentic Belonging

The people I "belong" to are the people I know I'm allowed to inconvenience.
Our congregation does a great job of gathering people,
but rarely goes beyond basic conversations.

I am learning to be vulnerable in order to create space for vulnerability in relationships. It is important to prioritize maintaining relationships and experiences that mean the most to you. God is helping me to learn and trust myself to be my full self in all my circles.

It is incredibly challenging to enter a new space. It feels easier to be lonely for extended periods of time than to seek new connections.

Young adults crave spaces where those around them are genuine and authentic—not fake. Sometimes, that's hard because churches are filled with people who care more about how they are perceived than about being their true, authentic, God-created selves.

VOICES OF YOUNG ADULTS

Mentoring

I think in the church we frequently think of discipleship instead of mentoring. But I believe there is a difference. Discipleship tends to be a teaching and learning experience, but I believe mentorship is a living together and learning together experience.

Mentoring is such a consistent and prevalent theme in the Bible that I am surprised it is not emulated today. Jesus mentored the Disciples. Religious leaders such as rabbis and imams often have a long unbroken mentor line. My professors all talk about who they learned under and from. Yet, I do not know where or how to begin this process. I know I need to be proactive in finding a mentor, but it would be nice to have support.

My most recent experience with mentorship has been a huge letdown. I currently have an assigned mentor, and it feels transactional and lonely. Mentors should not be assigned.

As my wife and I have moved, we have gained and lost mentor figures. Yet, I can still call upon their voices. Mentors have provided a sense of continuity even when I've left communities, even as the shape and regularity of our conversations have changed.

Invited to Use Gifts for Good

God has already equipped us with gifts and interests. We need an outlet to display them.

Churches love to know young adults with talents, but usually welcome them into the established way of using them in the church. The church should accept these talents and create a space to embrace the gifts as presented.

I find this generation's spirituality so beautifully encouraging, but I am worried about its individuality. Churches need to meet people where they're at, and foster communities around relational spirituality before our society decides that being spiritual alone is enough.

My most impactful community experiences occur outside of the church.

I see spiritual gifts in my friends, family, coworkers, and strangers. I feel as if the church puts so much emphasis on people's gifts that gifts become burdens. The church at large can invite, equip, and challenge us by letting us belong as we are.

HOW COLLEGE MINISTRY CAN BUILD A BRIDGE TO YOUNG ADULTHOOD



BE CLEAR ABOUT THE HARD SHIFT AWAY FROM COLLEGE COMMUNITY

Young adults need an ongoing reminder that once they graduate, it will not be as easy to find a community. Friends no longer live 10 minutes away. People don't just hang out in the middle of the day. College ministry can help young adults build habits to sustain ongoing friendships themselves, while offering regular reunion events to help young adults reconnect and renew.



PREPARE STUDENT FOR HOW TO FIND A NEW CHURCH

Young adults need help identifying what is essential to them in a new church and where they can be flexible with diverse approaches. A clear sense of what they want in church helps young adults find more meaningful and quicker connections to a church community.



DEVELOP LIFE SKILLS

Several life skill topics emerged throughout the interviews for inclusion in a

“Bridge” program into young adulthood:

- Faith and your First Job
- Getting Real with Relationships
- How to Meet New People
- Finances: Bills, Mortgage, Roth IRA
- Ways to maintain life/work balance
- Finding Mentors

HARVEST TEAM

This report is based on ethnographic research conducted by Rev. Dr. Meredith Bell and Rev. Dr. Todd Salmi from September 2023 to May 2024. This report offers important insights into the exciting yet challenging lives of 25-30-year-olds. It also offers ways college ministry can prepare students for graduation and ways local churches can include and encourage young adults in ministry.



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ADDITIONAL HARVEST PUBLICATIONS

Strategic Themes and Best Ministry Practices for College Ministry (2023)

Harvest Colab performed ethnographic research with more than 25 college ministry leaders (as well as two focus groups with active students) to uncover key themes and practices in thriving college ministries in a post-pandemic landscape.

Harvest College Ministry Colaboratory

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The 787 Collective creates new ways for young adults and communities of faith to be in relationship for mutual transformation toward healing and wholeness.

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METHODOLOGY

Methodology:

Ethnographic Research of Young Adults who participated in college ministry began in Fall 2023.

Ethnographic research provides space to deeply study and learn about young adults across the region to create an actionable report providing data and outcomes that provide ministry guidance with young adults as they graduate from college ministry and transition into independent young adulthood.

Two practitioners conducted research weekly for over three months, deeply studying and listening to young adults' experiences and responses to open-ended questions. The themes that emerged across multiple conversations were categorized and validated through research notes and interview transcripts. This initial report is the result of twenty conversations and captures emerging themes of young adulthood in post-college ministry.

Interview Questions for Young Adults

- What is the most exciting part of your life right now?
- What is your biggest challenge in life right now?
- Describe the role of your Christian faith in your life today.
- What do you wish college ministry had included to help prepare you for this phase of life?
- Who or what would you say is making the biggest impact on your life right now?
- What do we need to know that we didn't ask about?

(To date, 20 young adults have participated in our research.)

