



Establishing new young adult ministries

1. Why does the age gap exist?

To some extent there has always been an age gap in church attendance for many decades, as young people left home to begin college or careers. Typically, as people started families and began having children, they came back to the church. But in generations beginning with Baby Boomers (born 1946-64), there has been a shift. Because increasing numbers of people have not grown up in church, they do not know it is a resource for them to return to. With succeeding generations, fewer have grown up in church.

In addition, the mistrust of institutions, the rise of individualism, the change in the traditional family, and the growing diversity of our culture all conspired to give people the impression that they can do their spirituality on their own—it has become personal rather than communal. Right now, considering all denominations, there are record numbers of dying churches, due to all these forces coming into play. Most churches simply don't connect with Boomers and later cohorts. All of this has been documented by researchers including George Barna, George Gallup, Jr., and Robert Wuthnow.

Simply stated, the traditional church in its focus, trappings and organizational setup bear no relevance to younger groups. An example is the organ, which appears nowhere in most people's daily experience. Many current church people are left asking, "Why can't they enjoy our music?" This is emblematic of the approach churches have taken.

In a culture dominated by consumerism, we are all looking for something that works, that is relevant to our lives. Churches must change or die—a conclusion agreed upon by most church growth consultants and commentators.

Such is the backdrop of the age gap. Based on work by the researches above, there are some general characteristics of young generations, especially those born after 1981.

They:

- Take in information differently—parallel processing, or multi-tasking, means that they can be listening to rock music while studying. Attention spans are shortened, so that learning is done better through a multi-media approach, rather than in a linear, one person speaking at the front of the room method. Communication with images is also an important strategy.
- Discuss philosophical questions with their friends. They would rather try on an idea and experience it for themselves than be given the truth already concluded.

- Care deeply about the disadvantaged, and want to be directly involved in making a difference, rather than, for example, in making decisions about the color of napkins for the upcoming social.
- Are hungry for community. Friends and relationships are of utmost importance. They care less about programs and more about being centered on people.
- Are hungry for spirituality. But they don't necessarily see it as being something they can find in "organized religion." They tend to classify themselves as spiritual, not religious.

There is much more that has been written about this group, but this is an overview. In addition to national research, anecdotal evidence from our existing NGU participants supports these ideas. They also identified that their Unity churches would better serve them if they:

- Realized that young adults have much more to give than is often asked of them.
- Invited young adults to serve and participate. They often don't feel welcome.
- Saw them as an integral part of the church, not just as another program.
- Offered short term commitments to fit with the often frenetic lifestyles of young adults.
- Offered child care at every event.
- Offered events to reach people wary of the church who are interested in spirituality, such as book signings, discussion groups, guest speakers and musicians.

Young adults often feel alone in the world, and they are looking for a place to belong. One college student cited the reason for participating in a young adult program, "The unconditional love that is present...has meant the most to me." Another said, "It brought me back to an awareness of Spirit in my life, and this rediscovery helped me through some very difficult times."

2. What is our theory for overcoming the age gap?

We must meet young adults where they are. This may mean offering different ways of being part of the church than simply showing up for worship or attending a class designed for older adults. By offering them ways of engaging that fit with their lifestyles, they will be better able to see the relevance of being part of a faith community. Taking into consideration that we are all trained by our culture to screen out everything that doesn't immediately connect with our needs, we are not watering down the message, just the packaging. In marketing language, the Unity message can be presented using new methods that offer a better package of benefits through:

- Times and locations that fit with young adults' lifestyles
- Non-threatening events to those who fear organized religion
- Methods that allow for discussion, experience, and technology that engages young adults
- Addresses their life issues, i.e., relationships, finances, service

- Helps them discover their gifts and gives them a place to use them where they can make a difference
- Includes them in the larger church community

3. What are the opportunities to turn the age gap around?

Because of the mistrust of organized Christianity, Unity has a unique opportunity. Having an emphasis on practical Christianity and spirituality, and a decided sense of individualism, our message fits well with many young adults' views. Since many churches are made up of older adults, they often lack the understanding that reaching younger people requires an entirely different approach than those that worked in the past. The opportunity at the Association is to educate church leaders about this and to offer them tools and resources for creating NGU ministries in their churches. The opportunities are to meet young adults where they are, as stated in #2, by considering the areas where they are most "hungry."