

Covenant Churches Reaching Unchurched Young Adults: Effective Practices

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Many cultural observers believe our culture is “post-Christian,” in which churches are losing more young adults than they are gaining. Yet a noticeable phenomenon has occurred among some congregations in the Evangelical Covenant Church: young adults appreciate church, connect to faith communities, come to faith in Christ, and become incorporated into the life of their new churches. They then invite their friends to experience their churches. In this article I describe this phenomenon among nineteen Covenant congregations who are effectively ministering to young adults. A similar pattern emerged in examining and analyzing how effective Covenant churches have engaged younger millennials and Generation Z members, despite differences in church size, ethnic composition, and geographic and social locations. Data for the study was gathered through interviews with Covenant church pastors and leaders, as well as emerging adults who came to faith in Jesus Christ and became active in the life of their churches—the latter often in reverse order. This article has two major sections: “Understanding Current Challenges of Young Adulthood” and “Covenant Churches Effectively Reaching Out to Young Adult Dones and Nones.” My goal is to show how Covenant churches have effectively engaged, retained, and reached young adults by (1) providing access to a mentoring Christian community, and (2) leveraging participation in Christian practices that catalyze young adulthood’s developmental work of exploring, experimenting, and achieving well-developed cohesive personal and social identity commitments.

Understanding Current Challenges of Young Adulthood

Cultural trends and social forces impact young adults in ways both similar to and different from previous generational cohorts. Understanding what is currently happening in the world of young adulthood will help us better grasp why this generation often displays delayed spiritual and religious commitments, or lack of commitment.

Where have all the young adults gone? That is a fair question to ask when surveying congregations in the North American context.¹ Often, pastors and parents alike lament the scarcity of young adults in their churches. Remembering the vibrant ministries that attracted their own generation of friends to church, these older generations may be wondering whether all the Christian young adults are gathering at some hip new church plant or flocking to the local megachurch. The younger generations must be going to church somewhere, right?

Actually, many young adults are simply not attending church.² COVID intensified that phenomenon influencing current church attendance patterns. In fact, roughly only a quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds attend church.³ Their absence can be attributed, in part, to the fact that the number of young adults identifying as Christian dropped almost 10 percent over the past decade. The percentage of Americans who state that they have no religious affiliation, often described as “nones,” reached 35 percent among

¹ This question is reminiscent of the circular song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” by Pete Seeger. Peter, Paul, and Mary, The Kingston Trio, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and many others sang this song as political protest and lament over the consequences of war—especially the Vietnam War. The flowers are picked by the young girls, the young girls marry their young men, the young men become soldiers, the soldiers are gone to the graveyards, and the graveyards are covered in flowers, used here to express a communal lament over churches’ loss of their young adults.

² From a survey administered May 30, 2014, The Pew Research Center reported 27 percent of 18–29-year-olds attend religious service at least once a week (60 percent of the same age group seldom or never attend church), compared to 33 percent of 30–49-year-olds, 38 percent of 50–64-year-olds, and 48 percent of those surveyed who were 65 and older. See “Religious Landscape Study: 18–29-Year-Olds,” <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/age-distribution/18-29>, accessed June 23, 2021.

³ The Pew Research Center reported that the percentage of college graduates who identify as Christian declined from 73 to 64 percent between 2007 and 2015. Among those without a college education, it declined from 81 to 73 percent. See “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>, accessed October 6, 2021.

young adults aged 18–29 in 2015.⁴ A 2019 Pew Research study showed that millennials aged 23–38 were almost as likely to be religiously unaffiliated as they were to identify as Christian.⁵ Similarly, the Public Religion Research Institute found in 2018 that 38 percent of young adults aged 18–29 were religiously unaffiliated and that the percentage dropped to 36 percent in 2020.⁶ Combined, these studies show that well over a third of young adults in the US are now comfortable reporting that they are religiously unaffiliated.

Further, young adults drop out of church after high school at alarming rates. Researchers have found that around 50–60 percent of young adults in the USA will drop out of church for a year or more after graduating from high school—some never to return.⁷ Similarly, Canadian congregational research from the 2018 Renegotiating Faith survey reveals that about half of teens who grew up in the church persist in their religious service attendance into young adulthood, while 46 percent drop off and only 6 percent display an increase in church attendance.⁸ The study defined “church” as the whole Canadian church and engaged Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, Orthodox, and evangelical young adults.

Will young adult dropouts return to church and when? That verdict is still out. Are we encountering the temporary discontinuance of

⁴ According to the Pew Research Center, the religiously unaffiliated or “nones” include people who answer “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “nothing in particular” when asked to state their religious preferences. See “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” October 2, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise>, accessed October 6, 2021. This number may partly be increasing due to people feeling more comfortable admitting they are not religiously affiliated in the current cultural ethos.

⁵ Daniel Cox and Amelia Thompson-DeVeaux, “Millennials Are Leaving the Church and Not Coming Back,” <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back>, accessed September 27, 2021.

⁶ See “The American Religious Landscape in 2020,” <https://www.prri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/07/07/2021>, accessed September 27, 2021.

⁷ David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins found that 59 percent of young adults who grew up in church reported that they had dropped out of church. See their *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church—and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 23. Similarly, researchers Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin report a more conservative figure of 40–50 percent church dropout rate among Christian high school graduates from their analysis of the results of seven research studies. See their *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 318–319.

⁸ See Rick Hiemstra, Lorraine Dueck, and Matthew Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith: The Delay in Young Adult Identity Formation and What It Means for the Church in Canada*. (Toronto, Ontario: Faith Today, 2018), 13.

church attendance among young adults that may have been observed in earlier Christian generations, or is there a new phenomenon occurring in young adult church retention? With previous generations, sociologists could predict that at least half of young adults would continue to follow the religious patterns established prior to, or during, their early teenage years.⁹ In fact, those who dropped out of church were likely to return once they established stable careers, became financially independent, married, and started having children. Some, therefore, argue that there is no cause for alarm: young adults are merely switching denominations or busy managing their lives on their own, immaturely choosing not to attend church at this early stage. In the latter case, scholars note that young adults typically return to church when they grow into “mature adulthood,” which is generally defined as the stage when adults can manage their own lives, by meeting some or all of the typical milestones mentioned above.¹⁰

By “switching,” sociologists mean that young adults are transferring their religious affiliation from one denomination to another, not simply dropping out altogether due to secularization. In this view, then, some denominations are growing, while others are declining in number. Here, the growth of certain denominations is merely the result of transfer growth.¹¹

Why can't they get their act together? We did! Frankly, current young adults establish their identity commitments much later than older generations. By “identity,” psychologists mean the search for self and how the self relates to the broader social context. Identity exploration, a major characteristic of young adulthood, seeks to answer such questions as, Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? What are my goals, values, beliefs, people, and roles?

Developmentalists believed previous generations of young people wrestled with these questions in their teens. In the late 1960s, the acute “identity stage” within lifespan development was thought to occur in high school.¹² Identity formation was considered a lifelong process, though

⁹ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 243, 247–248.

¹⁰ Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 11.

¹¹ Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 11.

¹² Erik Erikson was foundational to identity theory and proposed an eight-stage developmental theory in which self-identity was stage specific and a major task of adolescence. However, Erikson considered identity formation to be an ongoing part of the life cycle.

significant identity questions consumed young people in particular: Who am I? What vocation will I pursue? Who will be my life partner? What communities will I belong to? The “identity stage” was thought to be completed within or shortly after high school.

Today, identity commitments—job, marriage, home, groups—are delayed by five, ten, or fifteen years compared to previous generations. Acute identity exploration is now considered to be part of a new developmental life stage called, “emerging adulthood,” a term coined in the mid-1990s by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett and colleagues. Emerging adulthood refers to the distinct developmental phase between adolescence and mature adulthood, age eighteen to twenty-nine or so.¹³ Identity exploration, the process of seeking to answer the same or similar questions as in earlier generations, is now thought to be most intensely engaged after the high school years, during late teens and twenties, even into the early thirties.

Arnett identified five common descriptors for the life stage of emerging adulthood: transition, instability, self-focus, identity exploration, and hope.¹⁴ During this developmental period, it is not uncommon for young people to be resilient and optimistic about their futures. They aspire to constructively make the world a better place, to make something of themselves, to be a good person, to be mentored, to become leaders, and to have a good life. Thus, much of their time is spent focusing on themselves as they try to figure out how to become independent and where they “fit” in the world.¹⁵ Through this identity formation, young adults often find meaningful life vocations and communities through experimentation, especially in the world of work.

¹³ The concept of “emerging adulthood” is attributed to psychologist Jeffrey Arnett. See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Susan Taber, “Adolescents Terminable and Interminable: When Does Adolescence End?” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 23 (1994): 517-37, and Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 469-80. For the more developed theory see Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Early Twenties*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Not everyone agrees that emerging adulthood is a “new” developmental phase. On this, see for example James E. Cote, “The Dangerous Myth of Emerging Adulthood: An Evidence-Based Critique of a Flawed Developmental Theory,” *Applied Developmental Science* 18 (2014): 177-88.

¹⁴ Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood,” 9.

¹⁵ See further Sandra Dalloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 85, 174, 229, 233-234, 236.

Furthermore, much of the lengthy extension of young adulthood is driven by global and local economic factors and the concomitant challenge of young adults seeking to support themselves financially. Freezes on hiring, baby-boomers delaying retirement, the need for more education and specialized training, the rise in artificial intelligence, lack of long-term job security, and the global pandemic—all these issues impact young adults' ability to stand on their own. We also find social and cultural factors that contribute to lengthened emerging adulthood, such as the GI Bill enabling more people to attend college, the availability of widespread birth control, recreational sex, and the reality of needed extended parental financial support.¹⁶

In addition, young adults marry today at lower rates and later than those of past generations, due to the economic and social factors noted above. According to the US Census Bureau, for example, in 2020 the average age of one's first marriage was 28 for women (up from 24 in 1990, 22 in 1980, and 20 in the 1950s) and 30 for men.¹⁷ As recently as a few decades ago, young adults who dropped out of church after high school and returned after marriage did so for only a handful of years. Today, however, many young adults have been out of church for more than a decade, forming patterns, habits, and friendships outside the Church. The pressing question is, are they likely to return to church when they can financially support themselves or marry, when they have dropped out of church for almost as long as they can remember attending church?

Certainly, there are other reasons that keep young adults from attending church. Christian Smith's research points to the delay in religious identity commitments until more pressing identity commitments are in hand, such as education completion, job security, financial independence, and home ownership. It seems that religious identity for some young people is not formed until many other identity commitments are first

¹⁶ Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 5.

¹⁷ See "Median Age at First Marriage: 1890 to Present," <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/ms-2.pdf>, accessed October 6, 2021. This is based on the 2020 US Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890-1940, and Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947-2020. (Starting in 2019, estimates for marriages now include same sex married couples.) Additionally, according to "The Knot 2020 Real Weddings Survey," updated February 2, 2021, based on 7600 couples surveyed, the average age of marriage in the USA was 31 for female participants and 33 for male respondents. See <https://www.theknot.com/content/average-age-of-marriage#the-2020-average-age-of>, accessed August 5, 2021.

made. Religious identity questions and decisions, such as “what I believe, how important my faith is to me, how often I pray, whether or not I will worship and where,” are set aside for a bit, or metaphorically secured within a security box, while other identities are being sorted.¹⁸ As such, a domino effect is often in play, and religious identity represents one of the last dominoes to fall into place for young adults.

Why else don't young adults attend church? Robert Wuthnow, sociology of religion professor emeritus at Princeton University, has pointed out another problem: too often, American churches have little to offer young adults.¹⁹ They provide programming and services for babies through high-schoolers, married couples, families, and seniors, but little is regularly made available for those between high school and later marriage and parenthood. Churches sometimes build a scaffolding to support members and attendees that is suddenly removed when people reach young adulthood. In this way, a gap often exists in both societal and religious structures for young adults, leaving them with little support. However inadvertently, this leads to churches sending a clear message to young adults: “You won't find any support here.”

In fact, Robert Putnam suggests that the offending of young adults' moral compasses stands as a reason for their absence from church. Pointing to Pew Research, Putnam notes, “The new nones reported that ‘they became unaffiliated, at least in part, because they think of religious people as hypocritical, judgmental or insincere.’”²⁰ Young adults who drop out of (or who never attended) church witness Christian institutions acting in ways that offend their moral sensibilities and conclude that they are not very Christian.²¹ At least some unaffiliated emerging adults dismiss Christianity and the Church on the basis of immorality, because they believe the Church has broken moral codes by their homophobic, hypo-

¹⁸ See Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2007), 4, 15, 39, 205-206. In this context, Clydesdale first used the metaphor of a lockbox, into which young adults in their first year out of high school transfer important identity decisions like their religious identity to a later adult stage, while they sort out managing their own lives at the earlier stage.

¹⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 70.

²⁰ Robert D. Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2010), 3, 131, 133, 548.

²¹ Seversen, *Not Done Yet*, 28.

critical, judgmental, and politically conservative stances.²² Such church dropouts accuse Christianity and the Church of being sheltered, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive and triumphalist.²³

As such, young adults may experience a jarring disconnect when local churches remain silent on issues that are of regular concern to them. For instance, churches may choose not to address economic and educational racial disparities, racial profiling, police shootings, and racial unrighteousness—issues that young adults often observe demonstrating white privilege and white supremacy. Silence on such matters communicates that a church does not care about the justice issues that impassion emerging adults. It is no wonder many young adults simply stop coming when issues near to them are not being engaged. Young adults do not need themselves to be engaged in your church's social justice ministries, but churches that attract them are churches engaged in caring for the poor and disenfranchised, and prohibiting social discrimination.

In my book *Not Done Yet*, I provide much more analysis on why young adults drop out of church, delay returning, and for some, never start attending in the first place.²⁴ So far, we have focused on the economic and social influences that delay marriage and family formation, and thus delay religious identity commitments. We also acknowledged the lack of support churches provide emerging adults aged 18–29 and their stage of development. Last, we recognized that young adults have moral compasses, particularly when it comes to how the Church thinks and acts, and they find hypocrisy an insurmountable barrier. In my book, I further explore the following related questions in greater detail: is church welcoming and compelling?²⁵ Does church support and meet the felt needs of emerging adults?²⁶ Does church speak to the injustices and issues they struggle with daily?²⁷ Is church good in the sense that it is moral and virtuous?²⁸ How churches perform on these questions really matters to young adults and influences their church attendance and adherence.

²² David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity—and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 41, 67, 91, 121, 153, 181.

²³ See further David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 90-93.

²⁴ Note Severson, *Not Done Yet*, 13-15, 18, 20-21, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-62, 77-91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79, 86-88, 95-97, 107-119, 158-160.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 79, 86-88, 95-97, 107-119, 158-160.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 140-147, 192-196.

Covenant Churches Effectively Reaching Out to Young Adult “Dones” and “Nones”

Now that we have explored what seems to repel young adults from church engagement, we shift to what churches can proactively do for young adults who are stalled in their identity formation journeys and, ultimately, in their faith journeys. My qualitative research focused on congregations in the Evangelical Covenant Church that are effectively reaching and keeping young adult church dropouts and the formerly unaffiliated. By observing these Covenant churches, we can learn what makes a meaningful difference in the lives of young adults and what attracts church dropouts and nones. I focus on how these churches are effective at engaging identity exploration as one of the primary tasks of the developmental life stage of emerging adults.

Patterns among churches reaching young adult dones and nones.

In a culture of young adult absenteeism, it is important to notice when churches are effectively reaching and keeping young adults. What are they doing differently and why? Is what they are doing or not doing reproducible? Does it pass the biblical and theological litmus test? My research among Covenant churches flourishing in reaching young adults revealed that these churches share a pathway, not a program. It is important to realize that a “one-size fits all” approach does not work for reaching young adults in a polarized culture, where some young people grew up saturated by church and are “done” with it while, simultaneously, a growing number of their peers have no personal experience with organized religion.

Nonetheless, churches effectively reaching, incorporating, and ministering to young adults do exhibit similarities in approach. The pattern includes emphases on building relationships with people far from God, engaging in spiritual conversations, and extending invitations to Christian community, specifically to service. Churches successful in this way enable meaningful, substantive service, emphasizing contribution before commitment. These churches seem to follow a similar path, as they connect to unchurched people and integrate them into the life of the church. Shea’s story illustrates this pattern.

Shea’s path to faith in Christ. Shea, an unchurched twenty-year-old, was interviewed eight months after she attended church for the first time. Shea’s life had changed dramatically during that eight-month period. Her story began with feeling lost, broken, hurting, and dealing with the consequences of bad decisions. Shea’s best friend invited her to come with her to church on a Sunday, believing it would help Shea.

Eight months later, Shea was a leadership intern at her church. What happened during those eight months?

The title of the sermon on Shea's first Sunday at church appealed to her. Shea was not sure what was happening, but she cried on the way home. She described her experience as "waking up a little more each day." When she went back to church a few weeks later, she heard about small groups—she was interested but did not pursue it. However, the church began to call and email her, and a young woman who worked at church met with Shea and introduced her to a small group where she found a community of young women who cared about her and were honest about their struggles. Within a month, Shea's small group leader invited her to begin serving at church. Shea was baptized three months after she began attending church. She describes her journey toward faith in Christ like this:

My first time I went to LifeGroup, I was like, this is what I've been looking for. They didn't even know me, yet they loved me and cared about me and were interested in what was going on in my life, and what God was doing in my life. That drew me in. Then I started serving at Life Kids. The girl who leads my LifeGroup invited me to coffee. She was very intentional. "I want to get to know you and learn what's going on in your life." I said I was very passionate about kids. I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. She asked, "Have you thought about serving on our Life Kids Team?"

I met the Life Kids team coordinator, and she did my orientation. She called me after my background check and asked if I wanted to get plugged in that weekend. I fell in love with it immediately. I fell in love with serving. I fell in love with the people who were serving. Then, at about three months, the Life Kids coordinator baptized me.²⁹

Shea's story illustrates the pattern shared by churches that are constructively impacting the identity and faith journeys of young adults. Shea was surrounded by a loving and caring Christian community. She was intention-

²⁹ Shea is a pseudonym, as her original name is changed to protect her identity. Note Severson, "Churches Reaching Emerging Adult 'Nones' and 'Dones' in Secularizing North America," in W. Jay Moon and Craig Ott, eds., *Against the Tide: Mission Amidst the Global Currents of Secularization*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 27 (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2019): 75-94. See also Severson, *Not Done Yet*, 39-40, 88-89, 116-117.

ally tapped by a church leader and directed into serving in a meaningful way, in conjunction with the church. Both an affirming community and a place to contribute resonate with young adults' identity exploration. Shea's church gave her the opportunity to experiment, to try out firsthand a Christian "group" to belong to, and a place to purposefully contribute. With the help of a vibrant church, Shea found her "vocation" and her way to fit or to be in the world—a good match for her identity search.

The church roundabout for young adults on their way to faith in Christ. Churches that excel at reaching and keeping emerging adults may be quite diverse in size, location, ethnicity, programming, emphasis, and other characteristics, but they tend to follow distinct patterns in their engagement with people outside of the Christian faith. These churches take unchurched "dones" and "nones" along a road that moves through certain discernable and measurable points, though this does not necessarily occur in a linear fashion. To extend the traffic metaphor, it may be helpful to think of these churches as intentionally building and operating "missional roundabouts" or "traffic circles."

Traffic roundabouts help drivers change direction by offering several different on-ramps at which cars can enter the circle. Similarly, evangelistically successful churches provide multiple entry points or "on-ramps" to church and to faith in Christ for young adults, thus helping them navigate a change in direction. Young adults' journeys to faith tend to follow similar access ramps: pre-Christians and post-Christians approach the roundabout from different directions, but along the way they pass some, or all, of the same terminals. As the figure below illustrates, we can envision the evangelism pathway established by these churches as a roundabout with five on-ramps.

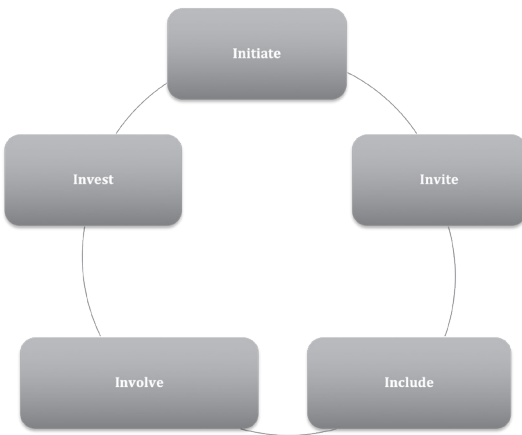


Figure 1: Churches reaching and retaining young adults: the pre-Christian and post-Christian pathway as a missional roundabout

As noted above, Shea's story is illustrative of the pattern shared by churches that positively impact the identity and faith journeys of young adults. See if you recognize the various on-ramps along the way that Shea traveled on her spiritual road trip. Which one served as her initial on-ramp to following Jesus?

First on-ramp: initiate. My research reveals how churches effective at reaching the next generation approached the broader social context with a posture of proximity and presence, in contrast to a posture of withdrawal and isolation. Attendees at these churches spent time with unchurched people in the places where they live and work, recreate and study. In addition to their nearness, they took the time to be present in the lives of unchurched people around them, thus cultivating community with friends who did not know Jesus.

Young adults interviewed for this study described having close relationships with Christian friends before they made faith commitments. Relationships involved investment of time together in shared activities. For Megan, that looked like evenings spent playing board games with Christian friends. Michael and Luke, who work together, had long talks about business, life, travel, and family. Kaitlin connected regularly with a friend for coffee or a drink at a local pub. Adam and Will saw each other every day at cross-country practice.³⁰ Nathan got to know a group of Christian friends through camping and ultimate Frisbee.³¹ The theme of initiating relationships with people far from God runs through all these stories. In each case, Christians initiated relationships with unchurched young adults and nurtured those relationships with invitations to spend time together. Church members initiated relationship building by renewing old friendships, deepening current friendships, and beginning new friendships. They also introduced their unchurched friends to other Christian friends. Creating these relational networks is an important on-ramp on the missional roundabout.

For example, Alex Rahill, former lead pastor of LifeChurch Canton, prompted his congregation to reach out to non-Christians in various spheres of their lives. He noted,

We intentionally do certain practices that make evangelism a normal and natural part of the life of the church. . . . [We say]

³⁰ Seversen, *Not Done Yet*, 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

God has strategically put us in the midst of a bunch of people who need him. God may be laying someone on your heart, a friend, or a relative. We do FRANC lists—friend, relative, acquaintance, neighbor, and co-worker—all the time.³²

In this manner, churches effectively reaching young adults actively encourage attendees to build, maintain, and deepen relationships with non-Christians.

Furthermore, emerging adults recognize when their churches prioritize building relationships with non-Christians and understand that the point is to genuinely care for friends, not to treat people as projects. Purposeful conversations allow them to connect with their friends' needs and longings. Michael, a young adult who attended a Covenant church in Chicago, described his pastor's emphasis on understanding people's struggles in the evangelism process in this way:

One of the things heavily encouraged and prioritized [at church] is building relationships with non-Christians. . . . The bigger part is really getting to know the community. Getting to know what the needs are . . . what their sticking points are. Why they haven't come to faith and just what they struggle with in general. It's so easy to project on them what you think . . . they need, when you have no idea.³³

Thus, young adult relational evangelism often follows a pattern of first initiating and building relationships with old and new friends outside the church, and then engaging in conversations about church, faith, or pastors. These conversations, generally initiated by the Christian friend, are attractive enough that emerging adults eventually respond to—or even ask for—invitations to church. Cultivating relationships, connecting faith or church to individuals' felt needs, and enthusiastically calling attention to faith, church, or Christian leaders are all critical points on the spiritual roundabout.

Second on-ramp: invite. After “initiate,” a further significant characteristic of Christian communities that effectively reach and keep young adults is the practice of *invitation* into a hospitable culture. Church attendees who are excited about their faith and church communities

³² Ibid., 65.

³³ Michael is a pseudonym. His name is changed to protect his identity. He now lives on the west coast. See further Seversen, *Not Done Yet*, 134.

cannot help talking about them and are intentional about inviting friends and family into Christian community. Moreover, these churches take care to create inviting spaces for unchurched people, practicing radical hospitality toward guests and visitors.

Not surprisingly, these churches expect and prepare for unchurched guests. Some offer entry points outside of weekend services, but most emerging adults first connect to church through invitations to the main worship service. This means that weekend worship services need to be the kind of place where Christians can expect their unchurched friends to have a positive experience. We do not have to design our worship services for the unchurched, but we ought to consider adjusting our services to create an inviting church culture in which unchurched visitors can understand the flow of service elements, follow along, and feel welcome.

Making church services inclusive and hospitable involves translating unfamiliar symbols and church-laden language, so that unchurched newcomers can make sense of what we are doing and saying in the context of Christian worship. We should consider how to introduce the elements of a worship service to people unaccustomed to church. For example, we might briefly explain why we are doing what we do at a given point in a service, we could adjust the way we preach to better unpack unfamiliar ideas, or we could provide directions to help new people find their way around the building. These are all examples of creating an inviting church culture for guests. Such welcoming steps also signal to regular attendees that they can safely bring their unchurched friends without making them feel like outsiders.

Third on-ramp: include. The rapid inclusion of newcomers is the most striking feature of the churches in this study. Churches began the inclusion process from day one by welcoming visitors into environments that were friendly, orderly, and safe, and by clearly communicating where to go and what to do. Guests were invited to join small groups or similar communities early in their church experience, giving them places where they could be introduced to Scripture, ask questions, unravel their preconceptions about God and the church, and explore Christian faith in general. An inclusive church community, such as a small group, helps young adults traverse unknown and seemingly treacherous territory with the support of faithful Christian friends. In fact, a significant finding in my research of these effective Covenant churches is that “nones” and “dones” found communities within churches to belong to *before* they fully believed. For instance, Pastor Aaron Cho at Quest Church in Seattle

recognized compelling community as integral to the faith journeys of young adults that lead to transformation. He noted,

I find that a part of the evangelism process, part of getting people to be on that journey is, “Are there others who are with me?” They feel like this journey is often isolated and long—they feel alone in it . . . things happen when we do things together in community. Questions are asked, questions are answered. Sometimes questions are asked and questions aren’t answered; and I think the phenomena, or the miracle, is that people are not opting to leave. They’re opting to stay, and they still are wrestling with unanswered questions. They may not say it this way, but you’re still on this journey; God is doing something in you, and you’re still staying and sticking with it. Getting plugged in to the church through small groups is the main way.³⁴

When thinking about the inclusion of newcomers, it is essential to recognize that unchurched young adults must overcome many internal barriers to successfully connect to a church. Young people may have strongly negative impressions of church communities (often for quite valid reasons) and do not want to be influenced by them.³⁵ They certainly do not want to feel judged or pressured. Among the young adults I interviewed, many initially feared that the church would pressure them to do, think, or be something they were not, or judge them for something they already did, thought, or were. They learned to see past these fears, but they needed their church to meet them halfway by clearly and consistently demonstrating that they did not need to fear the church’s rejection.

Fourth on-ramp: involve. To reach young adults, churches must involve unchurched people in the mission of the church as participants, not just as recipients. This is key. Young adults need opportunities to make meaningful contributions—to make a difference in their new community—in order to feel a deep sense of belonging. Churches effectively reaching young adults typically encourage young people to serve in the

³⁴ See Seversen, “Churches Reaching Emerging Adult ‘Nones’ and ‘Dones,’” 75-94.

³⁵ Putnam and Campbell write that “nones” purposefully reject the church due to the church’s lack of Christian virtues and particularly for the church’s stance on homosexuality, conservative politics, and exclusionary belief system. According to this argument, young people have a new moral sensibility and reject the church for its immorality. See in general Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace* (2010).

church *even before they make faith commitments*. Unchurched people are welcomed into spiritually appropriate ministry roles while they are still on their way to understanding Christian faith and discipleship. While this is a significant step in unchurched people's spiritual journey toward Christ, it may also be the most challenging step for churches that do not traditionally allow attendees to serve until they have formally joined the church or at least made a profession of faith.

Craig Groeschel, senior pastor of Life.church, reflected the views of many pastors in this study when asked why he thinks his church is reaching young adults. He commented,

I used to think, and I still do think, that getting them connected relationally really, really matters. But I think that getting them contributing matters even more. That generation wants to make a difference more than they want to make a living. If the church isn't serving in the community or making a difference, that's a real turnoff. If the church is missional and making a difference, that's a plus. If there's a place they can use their gifts and help make a difference, that's a plus. If they can lead it, that's a hundred times better—if they can be in charge of something.³⁶

Pastors such as Groeschel have figured out how to provide meaningful service opportunities for people journeying toward Christ—treating them as contributors, not just consumers. Unchurched young adults need to be guided toward places where they can make a meaningful difference, but where they will not gain spiritual influence over others before they are ready. They must be mentored by experienced Christians who will give them opportunities to develop in serving and discipleship, while also protecting the integrity of the church's teaching.

Fifth on-ramp: invest. Young adults were on the church leaders' radar either before or during their inclusion in community and involvement in service. Churches also reach young adults by investing in them. By helping young adults reach their potential, the churches in this Covenant study showed newcomers that the Christian community valued them and would give them opportunities to grow. Investing in young adults can include informal or formal mentoring, leadership development, accountability,

³⁶ See Severson, "Churches Reaching Emerging Adult 'Nones' and 'Dones,'" 75-94, and Severson, *Not Done Yet*, 103.

or pastoral care. These processes help young adults discover their gifts and envision themselves as future leaders connected to God's mission.³⁷ Relationships thus established are mutually beneficial: young adults give back to a community in which they find belonging, and the church invests in the pre-conversion process of a new generation of Christians.

Attractive journey: attractive church. All in all, we see that unchurched young adults who join and remain in Christian communities do so because they are attracted to their church. It should be no surprise that they want others to experience what they are experiencing. As these newcomers experience inclusion in community, involvement in service, and investment by mentors, they gain motivation to invite their own friends and family to church. Emerging adults who find a place to belong and contribute to a life-giving church in turn invite others to enjoy the benefits they receive.

Full circle: why it is working. Covenant churches effectively reaching and keeping young adults have this in common: they enable a connection to the essential developmental work that is characteristic of emerging adulthood—exploring and landing identity. Churches that help with identity exploration and fit are stepping up to provide young adults with part of the scaffolding and support they need for the identity work of this developmental life stage. Thus, it is key for churches to (1) invest in and mentor young adults, (2) allow for opportunities to belong to a community before they fully believe in Christ, and (3) contribute to that community before they commit to faith in Christ. By receiving opportunities to experiment with Christian identity in the context of an inviting and compelling congregation, emerging adults can “try on” Christianity like a new garment, to see whether it fits them well. The church then becomes that sandbox: what Erikson defined as that social moratorium, where young adults experiment and play with what it is like to be a Christian, to see if they resonate with Christian faith and discipleship before they fully commit to becoming Christian.

Naming the tensions. Michael Emerson raised two significant questions in his thoughtful review of *Not Done Yet* in the spring 2021 issue of *Covenant Quarterly*: (1) “Does belief matter? What if the unchurched

³⁷ Sharon Duloz Parks describes the importance of mentoring and the role of the mentoring community in identity exploration for young adults searching for their place in the world. See Sharon Duloz, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 13, 165-202, 213-220, 236-242, 268-271.

young people actively belong and participate, but never actually believe and commit to Christ and Christ-like lives?"; and (2) "Are there any limits to their involvement in the church?"³⁸

Attractive churches will gather people who are at different points along a faith spectrum. Some are curious yet eventually may not continue their journey to become true followers of Christ. Others, like most of those young adults interviewed in *Not Done Yet*, will eventually believe in Jesus, grow in their faith and understanding, and continue to trust and follow him as genuine disciples. We remember that in the Gospels, some of those gathered around Jesus eventually turned away from him, while others persevered and continued to follow Jesus.³⁹

Does belief matter? The reader may wonder what these young adults did believe after their short time incorporated into the life of the church—between six months to a few years. Emerging adults were asked to share a few statements related to what they believe about Jesus. Space prohibits a long list here, but the following selection of comments describes the transformation these emerging adults were experiencing with the aid of their churches and the work of the Holy Spirit:

"I believe Jesus is the Son of God and that there was an irreparable barrier between God and men that could only be healed through the sacrifice of God's son, Jesus. And if we believe in Christ then he can save us and repair our relationship with God, and we can have eternal life." (Adam)

"I believe that Jesus is my Lord and Savior. I believe that he is my God. I believe that he came to earth to live a life we could never live, to die a death we rightfully deserved, so that we can be reunited with him and our Father in heaven." (Michael)

"I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and lived a perfect, sinless life. He died for my sins. He's my advocator and through him I am blameless before God. He came so that I could have eternity with Christ. God raised him from the dead after three days and he overcame death." (Shea)

³⁸ Michael O. Emerson, review of *Not Done Yet: Reaching and Keeping Unchurched Emerging Adults*, by Beth Sevensen, *The Covenant Quarterly* 79 (2021): 56-58.

³⁹ For example, John 10:31-42 records responses of both opposition to and belief in Jesus.

“I believe that he resurrected and died. I believe that Jesus is God in human form. He’s like God in flesh; a hundred percent God and a hundred percent human. [I believe] that his story is true, that he resurrected and died for our sins. (Tessa)⁴⁰

Certainly not all young adults invited to belong and participate in church and who are mentored by mature believers will make full faith commitments to Jesus Christ. Still, we have much to celebrate and to hope for when we observe how these new believers had a developing understanding of Jesus’s life, ministry, death, resurrection, and salvific work on their behalf. It became clear from their interviews that these young adults were going through profound shifts in attitude, affinity, activity, and allegiance. Perseverance over time will indicate whether these shifts are prompted by socialization or conversion.

Six recommendations for getting started. As a church leader, then, where can you initiate, invite, include, involve, and invest in young adults at your church? Here are some suggestions.

First, thoughtfully consider a model of biblical evangelism that encourages and mobilizes congregants to initiate, develop, and deepen relationships with unchurched people, especially young adults. Provide ideas for nurturing friendships and talk about faith with young adult “nones” and “dones.” An effective model will help your congregation understand evangelism as a form of collaboration with God’s Spirit, to help people take steps toward trusting and following Jesus.⁴¹ Church leaders should genuinely invest in relational evangelism: model it, teach it, preach it, resource it, and commit to it for the long term.

Second, establish the expectation that non-Christians will be welcomed at your church. Encourage ministry leaders and teams to minister to newcomers by praying for them to come, preparing for their presence, and addressing their needs when they arrive. Work with each ministry in your church to set goals for extending hospitality and being inclusive of unchurched guests.

Third, mobilize congregants to invite close non-Christian friends to church and bring them into Christian community. Inclusion in small groups or other regular gatherings, where participants share life together, is particularly valuable for unchurched young adults.

⁴⁰ See further Severson, *Not Done Yet*, 203-20.

⁴¹ This is a paraphrase of the Evangelical Covenant Church’s definition of evangelism.

Fourth, look for places where young adults who don't know Jesus can contribute to your church community where they will not have spiritual influence. Provide opportunities for young adults to get involved, pursue their aspirations for making the world a better place, and explore Christianity. Invite leaders to identify volunteer positions that would be a good fit for pre-Christians and post-Christians, to create and to create new openings for unchurched people to become involved in meaningful ways.

Fifth, evaluate how well your church invests in young adults, and think strategically about how to improve this investment. Identify mentors who can guide young adults through the leadership development and discipleship process. Identify young adults to invite into mentoring and leadership development. Invite previously unchurched and non-Christian young adults into formal or informal mentoring relationships shortly after their first visit to church.

Sixth, identify unchurched young adults who may already be present around the fringes of your church. What specific steps can your church take to draw them into your community, encourage them to stay, and help them grow in faith? Do not leave them on their own to navigate your church—take the next step alongside them.

Conclusion

My qualitative research has shown that Evangelical Covenant Church congregations that are effectively reaching and retaining young adults tend to take five actions to help integrate evangelism into the life of the church community—these churches (1) initiate compelling relationships with young people who have not committed to faith in Christ, (2) enthusiastically invite unchurched young adults to church and offer radical welcome and acceptance when they arrive, (3) include newcomers in Christian community and let them belong before they believe, (4) involve unchurched young people in service opportunities early in their church experience, and (5) mentor and invest in young adults on their

⁴² The methodology for this qualitative study included 34 interviews of one to two hours in length. Identifying effective churches in reaching and retaining unchurched emerging adults was triangulated by conducting an online church survey sent to 875 Covenant churches, interviewing Covenant Conference Superintendents asking for churches effective in their geographic Conferences at reaching young adults, and through the research method known as “snowballing.” Lead pastors (in the case of two churches, associates were interviewed) and emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 33 who

way to faith in Christ.⁴²

Young adults who are invited, included, involved, and invested in—from the beginning of their church experience—tend to commit not only to Christ but to Christian community as a whole. They feel a deep attachment to the church that has walked with them in their journey toward Christ, and they lead others into the church using the same on-ramps that brought them into the community. Covenant churches making a positive difference in the lives of emerging adults are providing places for identity exploration and mentoring spaces, at the time when young adults are acutely attuned to searching for their place in the world. As Christians initiate, invite, include, involve, and invest in their still-unchurched friends, the evangelism roundabout continues to make disciples who in turn make more disciples. In this way, the church can sing no longer a dirge, but with hope, a new stanza:

Where have all the young adults gone? Long time passing.
Where have all the young adults gone? Long time ago.
Where have all the young adults gone? The church has
invested in them, everyone.
Help us to ever learn.
Help us to ever learn.⁴³

made first time faith commitments to Christ at pastors' churches were interviewed. These interviews were then coded using NVivo qualitative research software.

As I noted in a previous essay, "My selection process took into account church size, geographic location, environment (suburban or urban), age, and ethnic makeup, aiming to include a broad range of Covenant congregations. Aside from the omission of Latina/o and Hispanic churches the study reflected the ethnic composition of the Covenant including eight multiethnic, nine white, one African American, and one Asian church. It included eight suburban and eleven urban churches, representing all geographic regions in the Covenant except Alaska and the southeastern United States. One Canadian church was included; the rest were located in the USA. The study included two churches with over 10,000 attendees, three over 1,000 attendees, three with 500-999 attendees and nine with 175-499 attendees. The number of new young adult faith commitments in the previous twelve-month period required to qualify for the study precluded smaller churches." See Severson, "Churches Reaching Emerging Adult 'Nones' and 'Dones.'"

⁴³ Credit goes to current North Parker (NPTS student) Eliza Stiles for her contribution to the wording "The church has invested in them" in what is overall my own original stanza to *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*