American Congregations 2015

Engaging Young Adults

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www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org
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Introduction

Young adults pose a vexing and urgent challenge for congregations. On the one hand, they are particularly crucial for growth. On the other hand, and as many recent studies have shown, today’s young adults are less religiously affiliated, and less inclined toward religious belief and practice than ever before. As a result, their presence within faith communities has been on the decline for some time. In the United States today, young adults comprise about 23% of the total population; yet only one in ten American congregations reflects this level of representation.

Building on the 2010 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey and case study results, a special section of the FACT 2015 survey was dedicated to exploring young adult ministries (with “young adult” referring specifically to individuals who are 18 to 34 years old). Researchers created a module of 36 items to learn more about the nature of young adult engagement in congregational life. This report highlights major findings from that module in order to gain a better understanding of current trends and characteristics of congregations with flourishing young adult ministries.

Key findings elaborated in the report include:

- Young adults are more likely to participate in larger, more urban congregations in growing population areas.................................................................3
- Greater utilization of electronic technology, the Internet, and social media occurs in thriving young adult congregations.................................................................6
- In general, many of the same characteristics of thriving congregations also exist in thriving young adult congregations, including participants’ involvement in recruiting new people and engaging in congregational programs, committees, and service projects outside of worship.................................................................7
- Both prioritizing young adult ministry and creating a specific strategy for engaging young adults are necessary for a thriving young adult congregation.................................7-8
- Nearly half of all young adults in American congregations are married with children. However, most young adults are not married.........................................................8
- The majority of young adult participants come from families who are already present within the congregation.................................................................9
- Attending worship is the most frequent way that young adults participate in faith communities, but thriving young adult congregations tend to be those in which all of the members are involved more in activities beyond worship.................................................................10
- Young adult programming in congregations focuses largely on fellowship or other small groups, web/social media engagement, and community service........................................10-11
- Specific dedication of people and time around young adult engagement is the key to enhancing this ministry within congregations.................................................................12-13
- Congregations in which one or more leader(s) of young adult ministries are young adults themselves are more likely to have increased or maintained their young adult presence over the past three years.................................................................13
- Congregations believe that their own lack of desire/passion to reach out to young adults, as well as a lack of interest on the part of young adults themselves, most impedes their ministry with this population.................................................................14
The Faith Communities Today 2015 national survey of congregations is the fifth survey in a series beginning in 2000, and includes surveys in 2005, 2008 and 2010. This survey series totals over 32,000 responses from randomly sampled congregations in the United States, of all denominations and faith traditions. The 2015 survey contains responses from 4,436 congregations. This survey addresses the characteristics, programs and vital signs of congregations as reported by a key informant in the congregation, typically the senior clergy leader. Sample and survey methodology are described in more detail in the appendix, as is the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership which conducts the survey series. The initial research report, “American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving,” is available online at www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org, as are all FACT publications.

Young Adults “Unfriend” American Congregations

In the FACT 2015 survey, nearly one in five congregations (18%) reported no young adult presence in their congregations. This is a significant increase from 2010 when less than 8% reported no young adults at all. Overall, the average percentage of young adults in American congregations decreased from 14% of active participants in 2008 to 11% in 2015 (Figure 1).

There are many reasons why congregations are witnessing this generational shift away from organized religious life, including broader socio-cultural factors around the secularization of society, increased distrust of historical institutions, demographic and migration changes, the fluctuating nature of community and relationships resulting from the rise of technology and the Internet, overarching impacts of globalization, and so on. An exploration of these factors was beyond the scope of the Survey or this report. Nevertheless, there are key practices and characteristics of congregations that can make a difference in recruiting and retaining young adult participants. These are the focus of this report.

![Figure 1: Fewer Young Adults in Congregations](image)

The challenging reality of young adult ministry was so apparent that a special project was launched to examine more closely congregations in the Faith Communities Today 2010 survey that reported thriving young adult ministries. What could be learned from the highly successful congregations in attracting and keeping young adults?

A statistical overview of these results about young adult ministries from the 2010 survey, supplemented with a variety of qualitative case studies of congregations and a summary of recent writings on young adult ministry, is presented as a 262-page book entitled, “How Religious Congregations are Engaging Young Adults in America” (available in print and digital formats through Amazon).

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**Congregations with a “Critical Mass” of Young Adults**

Despite overall declines, many congregations do have young adult participants and report a thriving young adult ministry. Nearly 82% of congregations have at least one young adult participant, though this does not necessarily translate to having a thriving ministry for them. One hopeful sign for congregations with at least one young adult is that the vast majority (85%) either increased or maintained their numbers for this age group over the last three years.

For the purpose of highlighting key characteristics and practices, congregations considered to have a “critical mass” of young adults are categorized as those which have 15% or more young adult participants (about one-third of all congregations surveyed). These critical mass congregations tend to be located geographically in the South or West, as shown in Figure 2. In addition, they are at least twice as likely to be congregations with over 100 people in worship each week (Figure 3). Keeping these factors in mind, it is not surprising that critical mass congregations are more often situated in downtown areas or newer suburbs of large cities. Nearly half of all congregations in newer suburbs reported 15% or more young adult participants (Figure 4). Arguably, this is due to these areas having their own “critical mass” of young adults compared to rural or older suburban areas.

To test this theory, U.S. Census population data by age and zip code were examined in relationship to congregations’ young adult percentages. Predictably, congregations with young adults are much more likely to be located in areas where there is a similar or greater critical mass of young adults in their surrounding communities, as shown in Figure 5. While this may be good news for congregations in certain population areas, it is important to note that in areas with a large percentage of young adults only 28.5% of congregations reach a critical mass of young adults. This means that the other 71.5% are still less than representative of the 18-34 year old demographic in their surrounding communities.
Other characteristics of critical mass young adult congregations include higher likelihoods that the majority of regularly participating adults are theologically conservative (Figure 6), the congregation has higher percentages of children and youth (Figure 7), and the congregation prioritizes engaging young adults (Figure 8). This last characteristic may be the most important of all. Without high prioritization of young adult engagement, the chances of members of this demographic group walking through a congregation’s doors are slim.
Growing Young Adult Congregations

In addition to congregations with a critical mass of young adults, we examined the characteristics of congregations that have actually increased young adult participation over time (roughly 36% of all congregations that reported having a young adult ministry), as shown in Figure 9. In general, congregations that increased young adult participation over the last three years gained an average of nearly 20 young adults per congregation (with an increase of five young adults being the most frequent number reported). For each congregation that reported decreases in young adults over the last three years, nearly 15 members left the congregation on average (with a decrease of ten young adults as the number reported most frequently).

Like critical mass congregations, growing young adult congregations are more likely to be located in the South (though more of these congregations are located in the Northeast than in the West when compared with critical mass congregations), situated in small and large cities, and theologically conservative (though a much greater percentage are also likely to be liberal than in critical mass congregations). They are even more likely than critical mass congregations to prioritize young adult engagement. Interestingly, there is little difference in the percentages of children or youth in growing young adult congregations when compared to congregations with stable or decreasing numbers of young adults.

All things considered, congregations with young adults tend to be in areas where there was also a general population increase over the past three years. The majority of these congregations are ones in which the number of young adults either increased or stayed the same over the past three years. Moreover, congregations that increased in the number of young adults are located in areas in which the general population grew the most over the past three years, with an average increase of over 1,000 new residents. Even in congregations in which the number of young adults stayed the same or decreased, the surrounding populations experienced an increase; so area population changes only account for a portion of the changes seen within congregations regarding young adults.

Figure 9: Congregations With A Young Adult Ministry Increase or Remain Steady Over Time

% of Congregations With A Young Adult Ministry

- Congregation Increased Number of Young Adults: 14.3%
- Congregation Stayed the Same in Number of Young Adults: 49.6%
- Congregation Decreased Number of Young Adults: 36.1%
Many of the factors found in thriving (as well as growing) congregations also hold true for congregations with higher percentages of young adults. As chronicled in previous FACT reports, growing congregations engage young adults better, have more innovative worship, are more actively involved in recruiting more people, engage in greater use of electronic technology and the internet, and are often more racially/ethnically diverse, among other characteristics. Congregations with thriving young adult ministries (referred to below as “thriving young adult congregations”) also possess many of these same vitality marks.

Use of the Internet and social media is higher among participants in thriving young adult congregations. These congregations are more likely to report that many, most or all of their regular participants use the Internet or social media on a daily basis (Figure 10). In addition, thriving young adult congregations tend to use most electronic technology and Internet tools at higher rates, with the most notable tools being Facebook, texting, and WiFi access in the building as shown in Figure 11. In general, thriving young adult congregations are almost two times more likely to be racial/ethnic majority congregations than majority white congregations (Figure 12).

With regard to worship, thriving young adult congregations are more likely to report higher ratings on all named worship descriptors, which include worship being: innovative, reverent, thought-provoking, filled with a sense of God’s presence, inspirational, and joyful. These congregations also report more frequent use of a variety of musical instruments in worship, including the organ, drums or other percussion, and electric guitar/bass. While trends from past FACT survey findings still hold true that young adults are attracted to electric guitars and drums, results of this latest survey also suggest that many young adults also participate in worship using more traditional instruments like the organ.
Similar to participants within thriving congregations in general, regularly participating adults in thriving young adult congregations are more involved in recruiting new people, with about half of these congregations (49.2%) engaging in this practice quite a bit/a lot and only a third (32.9%) engaging in this activity not at all/a little/some. More striking, however, is participants’ involvement in congregational programs, committees, and service projects outside of worship (Figure 13). For thriving young adult congregations, engagement beyond worship for all members speaks to the presence of a mission and purpose that necessitates action and commitment beyond weekly worship attendance. As a result, it is no wonder that these thriving young adult congregations have a clearer mission and purpose in addition to being:

Better at incorporating newcomers into the congregation
- More spiritually vital and alive
- More caring and supportive of members
- More willing to meet new challenges
- More social justice oriented
- Different from other congregations in their community
- More intentional about maximizing the number and variety of small groups the congregation offers

Each of these vitality indicators requires involvement in the congregation beyond worship, which is a key factor in young adults’ participation.

**Strategy Matters**

Congregations engage with young adults in myriad ways; but before highlighting significant trends, it is important to explore strategies undergirding this engagement, or the lack thereof. Congregations undertake a number of different strategies for engaging young adults. Depending on the strategy, outcomes vary. Figure 14 illustrates various strategies and how frequently they are used by different congregational groupings. In total, over one-third of all congregations have no intentional strategy for young adult ministries. Conversely, nine in ten congregations with thriving young adult ministries have some intentional strategy for engaging young adults.

Generally, smaller congregations (100 or fewer in worship) are nearly two times more likely to have no strategy for engaging young adults than larger congregations (over 100 in worship). Not surprisingly, these larger congregations are more likely to have a strategy geared toward creating...
special opportunities and programs specifically for young adults, given the increased financial and other resources available within these congregations.

It turns out that both prioritizing (shown previously in Figure 8) and having a strategy for young adult engagement are strongly related to higher percentages of young adults within congregations, regardless of the size and location of the congregation. For those congregations with no intentional strategy and no prioritization of young adults, the average percentage of young adult participants is quite low (less than 7%). Significantly, different strategies and levels of prioritization result in different outcomes for congregations. For example, if the strategy is totally geared toward involving young adults in the general life and worship of the congregation, but young adult engagement is not a priority; the likelihood that the congregation will have young adults in the congregation is nearly nonexistent (average young adult percentage in these congregations is around 3.5%). It appears that these congregations really do not have an intentional strategy for engaging young adults and most likely assume that what is already offered in worship and programming should automatically attract young adults. Strategy (a plan) and prioritization (taking steps to act on that plan) are both necessary to create thriving young adult ministries.

**Young Adults in American Congregations: Who Are They?**

There are varying perceptions—accurate and inaccurate—about young adults in congregations today. Beyond that, some congregations tend to hold up certain idealized versions of the types of young adults that they desire to attract, with particular end goals in mind. For example, one congregation may want to attract young married families with small children in order to grow the religious education program; another may seek to attract young, single working professionals who can boost the congregation’s finances. Based on the data collected from American congregations, it appears that these perceptions need to be a bit more nuanced and are impacted greatly by the surrounding context of the congregation.

Exactly who are these young adults currently engaged in religious life today? In terms of familial status, four in ten (43.1%) young adults are, on average, either single or partnered/engaged. With many congregations desiring to attract only married young adults with children, this could create an interesting challenge, even as married young adults (with or without children) comprise 56.9% of this population within congregations. Interestingly, these percentages do not change significantly based on whether the congregation has increased, stayed the same, or decreased its young adult participation in the last three years.

The family status of young adults is related to geographical context in ways that one might expect. Higher average percentages of both single and partnered/engaged young adults without children are present in downtown urban congregations. Higher average percentages of married young adults with children are found in more rural and small town congregations. Regionally, higher average percentages of single young adults attend congregations in the Northeast, even when accounting for geographical context and congregational size (Figure 16). Conversely, even though a higher percentage of congregations with 15% or more young adults are located in the West and South (Figure 2), it is important to note that congregations in these regions have a greater average share of married young adults with children than single young adults.

Context truly matters when it comes to young adult engagement, and knowing the demographics surrounding one’s congregations can make a significant difference in strategy and programming. Congregations with more singles also tend to be those with more young adults from nearby colleges or universities (as well as in downtown urban areas). Congregations with more young married couples with children also tend to be those in which more young adults come from nearby workplaces (rather than having young adults from nearby colleges/universities). The nuances of these relationships are
subtle, but they demonstrate that certain contextual patterns are critical in attracting young adults. In the end, some of the long-held assumptions about young adults hold true; but newer findings around the prevalence of familial/generational young adult participation in congregations is an area worthy of further exploration and also intersects with other important research on young adults and faith.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that 70% of active young adult participants within any given congregation come from families within that congregation, meaning that they are related to other members (Figure 17). While some young adults do engage with congregations because of proximity to workplaces, colleges, universities and military bases, these types of settings are known to be highly transitory which could account for young adults’ overall absence within congregations. Generally, congregations with young adults from nearby colleges or universities are over four times more likely to be located in areas in which 18-34 year olds make up a critical mass (at least 15%) of the population. In comparison, congregations with young adults related to families within those congregations are equally likely to be in low- or high-density young adult population areas.

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Young Adult Engagement in Congregations

It is also important to explore the nature of young adult religious participation. On average, nearly 70% of young adults participate by attending worship and about half (46%) participate in programs/activities other than worship. This involvement varies by size, however, with congregations of 100 or fewer in worship reporting higher worship attendance by young adults (Figure 18). This could be due to smaller congregations having fewer options for programming, so worship tends to be the main gathering opportunity for all participants. Interestingly, there is virtually no difference between smaller and larger congregations in terms of the percentage of young adults who participate in activities other than worship. Smaller congregations often believe that the key to attracting more young adults is creating more programs and activities, but this finding directly refutes that assumption.

Even though young adults in both small and large congregations participate at similar rates in activities outside of worship, thriving young adult congregations tend to be those in which all of the members (i.e., members of all ages) are involved more in activities beyond worship, as demonstrated previously in Figure 13.

For the congregations that do offer a variety of programs and activities, some of them also offer opportunities specifically for young adults. Nearly half (49%) of all congregations report having at least some emphasis on programs specifically for young adults. The most frequently named young adult programs/activities for all congregations, as well as for thriving young adult congregations, are shown in Figure 19. In general, the most emphasized activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young Adult Program/Activity</th>
<th>% Thriving Young Adult Congregations: A Lot of Emphasis or A Speciality of the Congregation</th>
<th>% All Congregations: A Lot of Emphasis or A Specialty of the Congregation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship Groups</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web/Social Media Sites</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture Study Groups/Classes</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Service Activities</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theology or Contemporary Issue Study Groups/Classes</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational, Sports or Other Physical Activity Groups</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting Groups/Classes</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer/Meditation Groups or Spiritual Retreats</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship Service(s)</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Trips/Travel Groups</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage Groups/Classes</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement/Pre-Marital Groups/Classes</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singles Groups</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Engagement</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Engagement Dating Groups/Classes</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 18: Worship Matters to Young Adults

Figure 19: Young Adult Programs/Activities in Congregations
focus on small groups/classes of various types and purposes—fellowship, Scripture study, or theology/contemporary issues. Among thriving young adult congregations, fellowship groups are the most prevalent programs. Community service activities also rank highly among young adult activities. In addition, web/social media activity for young adults is emphasized greatly, which is moderately related to a congregation’s emphasis on small groups and community service activities. In this regard, web/social media use is a tool for maintaining connections and serves as a communication and organizing platform for group activities. Above and beyond this, however, young adults’ social media use is a primary means of building relationships and should be understood as a ministry in and of itself.

Overall, parenting, marriage and pre-engagement groups/classes are not emphasized as highly as other items. However, married young adults and young adults with children tend to participate in smaller congregations in rural or small town settings, which usually do not have resources for such programs and most likely utilize individual sessions with the congregational leader as needed. As expected, in all programs/activities specifically for young adults, larger congregations tend to place more emphasis on them than smaller congregations, most of which did not have these programs at all.

Of course, young adult engagement is not limited only to specific opportunities for this age group. Young adults participate in all areas of congregational life, including programs available for all members. In fact, this type of participation may even exceed participation rates for young adult-specific activities and programs, though this is due most likely to the lack of specific programming for young adults in a majority of congregations. For example, thriving young adult congregations place greater emphasis on all programs as shown in Figure 20 and, most notably, on youth (13-17) activities or programs (related to Figure 7), fellowship activities, and prayer/meditation groups. This makes the case that young adults contribute to the vibrancy of congregation-wide programs, thus enhancing overall vitality.

When it comes to religious education programming, young adults only comprise about 9% of the total of a congregation’s participants on average, the least of any age group. However, for those congregations with a critical mass of young adults, participation percentages for this age group increase to nearly one-fourth (25%) of all regular religious education program participants. Clearly, the presence of 18-34 year olds in American congregational life is a significant contributor to the overall vitality of religious communities.

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**Figure 20: Young Adults Enhanced by A Congregation’s Programs and Activities**

- % All Congregations with A Lot of Emphasis or A Specialty
- % Thriving Young Adult Congregations with A Lot of Emphasis or A Specialty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>% All Congregations</th>
<th>% Thriving Young Adult Congregations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth (13-17) Activities or Programs</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowships or Other Social Activities</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Service Activities or Helping Those in Need</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>75.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible, Scripture or Theological Studies (Other Than Sunday School)</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Programs</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>65.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer or Meditation Groups or Spiritual Retreats</td>
<td>49.9%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leadership is an important factor for congregations that desire to have a thriving young adult ministry. Over one-third (36%) of all congregations have at least one leader whose specific responsibility includes engaging young adults, but nearly two-thirds (65%) of congregations with thriving young adult ministries have at least one leader for this specific ministry. As shown in Figure 21, a majority of leaders in thriving young adult congregations are unpaid volunteers. Congregations that have decreased in the number of young adults in the past three years are more likely not to have any leader whose specific responsibility includes young adult programming.

As expected, the type of leader for this ministry depends on a congregation’s size, with larger congregations having more paid part-time and full-time professionals dedicated to young adult engagement than smaller congregations. For this reason, these congregations tend to more frequently report having thriving young adult ministries. Moreover, larger congregations also utilize volunteers at greater percentages than smaller congregations for this ministry. This is not surprising since appointing or hiring leaders for young adult engagement, whether paid or volunteer, indicates the presence of a strategy and the prioritization of young adult ministries, a characteristic of many larger congregations.

Congregations often hire or recruit young adults in the hopes that they will be able to relate better generationally and increase their young adult numbers overall. For the congregations that do have leaders with responsibility for young adult engagement, six in ten of those leaders (62%) are young adults themselves. As shown in Figure 22, thriving young adult congregations are 2.5 times more likely to have one or more leader(s) of young adult ministries be young adults themselves. But even when none of the leaders of these ministries are young adults themselves, three out of four congregations with a specified leader for its young adult ministry still managed to increase the numbers of young adults or stay the same. In sum, having a designated leader who dedicates time to ministries with young adults—whether paid or unpaid—seems to be a wise decision for a congregation.

**Leadership and Young Adults Ministries**

**Figure 21: Leadership of Young Adult Ministries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% All Congregations</th>
<th>% Thriving Young Adult Congregations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, One or More Part-Time Paid Professional(s)</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, One or More Full-Time Paid Professional(s)</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 22: Young Adult Leaders Make A Difference**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Congregations: One or More Leader(s) Are Young Adults Themselves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Congregations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thriving Congregations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interestingly, if there is a young adult leader of young adult ministries present in the congregation, the age of the primary congregational leader is younger. For congregations that do not have any designated leader for young adult ministries, the primary congregational leader (whether a lead priest, pastor, rabbi, imam, president, or otherwise) does not tend to be a young adult. In fact, for congregations that struggle with having a young adult ministry or have none at all, the average age of the primary congregational leader is older than in congregations where young adult ministries are thriving (Figure 23). In addition to being younger, primary leaders of congregations with vital young adult ministries are more likely to be male than female and to serve as full-time paid professionals than any other employment status as shown in Figure 24.

Aside from the factors of leadership structure and age that only modestly influence young adult ministry, the number of hours that a leader dedicates to this particular ministry is more strongly related to the vitality of a congregation’s ministry with this population. The more hours that a leader spends on young adult ministries, the more likely the congregation is to have a thriving young adult ministry. Moreover, congregations with thriving ministries report their leader(s) spending an average of 20 hours per week on young adult programming/engagement. While financial resources certainly contribute to thriving young adult ministries, utilizing volunteers/unpaid staff is also shown to be effective, particularly if these leaders are young adults themselves. All in all, the key to enhancing young adult engagement within congregations is to specifically dedicate people and time to this effort.

Figure 23: Primary Congregational Leader’s Age and Thriving Young Adult Ministries

Figure 24: Primary Congregational Leaders’ Employment Status and Thriving Young Adult Ministries
The Future of Young Adult Ministries

A majority of all congregations believe that having more desire or passion to reach out to young adults, better contact with young adults in the community, ideas and strategies for engaging young adults, and more interest on the part of young adults themselves are all important for improving ministry with young adults (Figure 25). Financial or other resources, however, do not seem to be as necessary a condition for improving these ministries among congregations since many young adult ministries rely on volunteer/unpaid leaders. In essence, the items most important to all congregations are related to outreach challenges with this particular generation, especially around motivation on the part of the congregation and interest on the part of young adults themselves.

Not surprisingly, most thriving young adult ministry congregations do not report that any of the factors in Figure 25 are very important or essential to improving those ministries, perhaps because these factors are already present and realized within their congregations. But, thriving young adult congregations did indicate that financial resources would improve their ministries in this area—over and above better ideas or strategies or more interest from young adults. This may signal that the presence of young adults has created a need for dollars to support growing programs.

The fact that American congregations believe more interest on the part of young adults is essential, while at the same time recognizing their own lack of desire/passion to reach out to this age group, highlights a paradox that must be examined more thoroughly. Underlying assumptions regarding young adults themselves may, in large part, be a contributing factor hindering many congregations from developing an intentional strategy or prioritizing ministry with this population. For example, stereotypes of young adults as lazy, inattentive, materialistic, and not interested in spiritual matters might contribute to a congregation’s overall lack of desire to engage this population. Furthermore, age and generational differences between participants in a majority of American congregations (largely made up of Baby Boomers) and Millennials, who make up a larger percentage of the general population, may exacerbate those assumptions. In order for congregations to truly garner the interest of more young adults, it may also require significant changes in the overall structures and practices of faith communities. If there is little openness to change, or a lack of willingness to meet new challenges, then attracting young adults will be an uphill battle.

As we said at the outset, creating a future in which young adults are a significant part of American congregational life is not an easy challenge. As this report has demonstrated, a number of factors—both internal and external to congregations themselves—impact success in engaging this population. In the end, there is no “magic bullet,” no single solution that will turn congregations into places where young adults are both welcomed into an existing structure, and also empowered to transform those structures in ways that are meaningful for them. Passion and intentionality—in the form of strategies, priority, people, and time—are essential for cultivating this ministry; but ultimately, these things are necessary for building any thriving ministry. We can no longer expect that young adults will come through the doors of congregations on their own. Instead, we must make it a priority to go beyond our walls in order to engage this generation and co-create truly thriving communities of faith.

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www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org
The Faith Communities Today Surveys

The Faith Communities Today national surveys of American congregations are aggregations of several national sample surveys conducted by denominations and faith traditions that are members of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP—see below). These are supplemented by a random, national “church list” sample of non-participating member congregations and non-member congregations. The aggregated national sample includes all faith groups that have congregations in the United States. The decadal 2000 and 2010 surveys include surveys from all CCSP partners, plus the non-partners sample, in each case totaling over 10,000 responding congregations. The 2005, 2008 and 2015 surveys have fewer partner-contributed surveys, and therefore smaller numbers of responding congregations—884 responding congregations in 2005, 2,527 congregations in 2008 and 4,436 in 2015.

The surveys in any given year are combined in such a way that, through the use of statistical weights, each partner denomination and faith group, and each non-partner cluster of congregations are represented in the data set proportionate to their representation in the total population of congregations in the United States. The 2005 through 2015 survey data is further weighted to best estimates of national parameters for denominational family and census region, thereby improving the data’s representation as true national samples of American congregations.

CCSP partners develop a common questionnaire for each survey, ranging from 150 to 200 questions. The questionnaires contain about an equal mix of continuing trend questions and items unique to a particular survey. The surveys are typically conducted by mail and/or online, although in a few instances are supplemented by telephone interviews. Questionnaires are completed by a key informant reporting on his or her congregation. The key informant is typically a congregation’s senior clergy leader. Copies of all FACT questionnaires are available at: http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/

FACT2015 includes surveys from:

- Canonical Orthodox Bishops in North and Central America
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Megachurches
- Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod
- National Spiritual Assembly of Baha’is of the U.S.
- Presbyterian Church, USA
- Random “Church Lists” Supplement provided by FaithStreet
- Seventh-day Adventist
- Unitarian Universalist Association
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist Church

The aggregated dataset is double-weighted, as noted above. First it is weighted proportionate to the national representation of contributing denominations/groups. It is then weighted to represent denominational family by census region parameters attained from a combination of the National Congregations surveys and the 2010 U.S. Religious Census.

The Faith Communities Today Project

The FACT series of national surveys of American Congregations is a project of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership. CCSP is a multifaith coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by Hartford Seminary’s Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The primary purposes of CCSP are developing research-based resources for congregational development and advancing the public understanding of American congregations. More information about CCSP, its partners, its publications, the FACT surveys and how to subscribe to its monthly newsletter is available at: http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/

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