

# LCMS YOUNG ADULT RESEARCH

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Summary and Resources from  
2017-2018 Research Study on Millennials and the LCMS  
conducted by LCMS Youth Ministry and LCMS Research.  
Full Data Available at [youthEsource.com](http://youthEsource.com)



# INTRODUCTION

In 2016, LCMS Youth Ministry and LCMS Research began an unprecedented research project to understand Millennials in and out of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We sought to see how our church retained young adults through confirmation and to encourage practical changes to better care for the faith of Millennials and Generation Z. LCMS statistics show that Millennials were baptized in smaller numbers than generations before, despite an increase in infant births nationwide. Declining retention rates beginning with the Baby Boom Generation have led to fewer and fewer young people in the pews.

LCMS Youth Ministry and LCMS Research looked over our numbers and became convinced that a research study would give us important insight into how to keep and grow the number of young people in our synod's congregations. Many have studied this current generation of young adults. There is already a multitude of helpful resources regarding young adults, from ministering to those who are part of the worshiping body, to attracting new young adults from the community, and even in understanding the broader trends in their worldviews and values. Our hope is that this research will only strengthen congregations to shepherd and care for this generation of young adults and the ones who will follow them.

## In this Magazine

We have included a variety of resources in this magazine. The Executive Summary will help you to get the overall picture of the research. Following that are a variety of articles written by our research team, which flesh out some of the findings and how they may practically apply to your ministry. Finally, there are discussion guides that can be used for you and your leadership team. These guides are designed to highlight just a small piece of data that we felt was significant. Read through our findings and use the questions to guide a conversation with parents and key lay leaders as you serve the youth of your congregation. We hope that these will highlight key findings and help you apply them to what God is doing in your congregation.

For more on this research:  
Go to [www.youthesource.com](http://www.youthesource.com)

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“Last Sunday, my new pastor shared about his story and struggles he has had in life. He really touched me during his sermon, he showed me a side of a pastor that I have never seen before. It made me realize that they, too, are not perfect. And to be perfectly honest I have never wanted to truly go to church before in my entire life. But now I am excited for church and can't wait 'til I get to hear another sermon.”

20-year-old  
LCMS Lutheran



## Project Summary

Millennials are the largest segment of the U.S. population, but only a small component of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). LCMS Youth Ministry partnered with LCMS Research to conduct an unprecedented study of young adult retention in the LCMS and in the larger Christian Church. The study consisted of two phases. First, we surveyed congregations about the current retention of young people who were confirmed between 2004 and 2006. Second, we conducted a survey of young adults who had been, or are now, connected with the LCMS. The results showed important indicators for improving retention from confirmation and ministering to Millennials and generations after.

## Background

In 2016–2017 LCMS Youth Ministry conducted several small research projects, which left lingering questions about Millennials in our church body. This research



# Executive Summary

## 2017 MILLENNIAL RESEARCH



showed that Millennials were baptized in smaller numbers than previous generations, despite an increase in infant births nationwide. Zero junior confirmations were reported by 50-65% of congregations in at least one year of the 2012–2014 reporting cycle. The lower numbers of Millennials found in LCMS congregations began with retention issues in the Baby Boom Generation. Additionally, a 2016 survey of Young Adult Volunteers at the LCMS Youth Gathering raised questions about what factors may play into the retention of young people in the LCMS. Our 2017 research sought to answer some of these questions and allowed us to provide practical ministry suggestions for congregations, church leaders and young adults.

### Goals for Study

- Collect data specific to young adults who grew up in the LCMS, regardless of their current faith affiliation, focusing on their home congregation, family, current beliefs and what influences their relationship with the church.

- Compare research findings from a specifically LCMS perspective with findings from studies in broader American Christianity (Fuller Youth Institute, National Study of Youth and Religion, LifeWay, etc.).
- Initiate a conversation in the church about the care for the Millennial generation, repent where needed, correct and capitalize on our strengths to serve plurals/Generation Z and future generations.

### The Process

For our first phase of research, 1800 congregations were included in a random sample with a ratio designed to reflect the size and location of the LCMS overall. Of those surveyed, 184 congregations responded, usually through a pastor or DCE. The survey contained questions about the congregation and specifically the confirmation classes of 2004–2006. Assuming the standard confirmation age of 12–14, these young people would now be in their mid-twenties and thirties. Since many

pastors or DCEs were not at the congregation during those years, respondents were encouraged to recruit help from staff or parents who might know more about these young people.

In our second phase of research, we conducted an online survey of young adults. LCMS Youth Ministry used social media to promote the survey and encouraged people to tag individuals in our target group. Congregations who had participated in the previous study, as well as LCMS districts, were asked to encourage participation in the survey. A total of 2,046 young adults, with an average age of 24, took the survey. Nearly twice as many women as men (F:66% M:34%) responded. Eighty-eight percent were confirmed between sixth and ninth grade.

The survey took 15-20 minutes to complete and asked young adults about their life, current faith practices and theology. The questions were designed to apply to both active LCMS members and those who have distanced themselves from the church. The only distinction between the questions for these groups was that those who were inactive or who had left the church were given additional short answer questions.

In our third phase of research, we conducted nine 90-minute focus groups. These focus groups addressed issues of welcoming, leadership, support and diversity. The invitation for attending the focus groups was offered to both active LCMS young adults and those who had left the LCMS. Only those currently active in the LCMS chose to attend. The focus group questions helped give definition and nuance to many data points seen in the first two phases of research.

It is well-known that many in our culture hold views that are opposed to the Bible and the church. In learning about these differences, this is not in any way to suggest the church is considering changing its stance or turning away from sound biblical teaching. This study is an exercise in careful listening so that church leaders and ministers are equipped to defend doctrine while compassionately engaging the whole spectrum of viewpoints found throughout this diverse generation.

We identified seven groups within the 1,934 who took the survey who were confirmed in the LCMS.

#### **LCMS (1,579)**

- Active LCMS (1,393) — worship at an LCMS church at least once a month
- Nominal LCMS (186) — do not attend worship monthly, but consider themselves LCMS Lutherans

#### **Not LCMS today (355)**

- Evangelical Protestant (163) — those attending evangelical protestant denominations (WELS, SBC, PCA, etc.), or a non-denominational church

- Mainline Protestant (63) — those in mainline denominations (ELCA, PCUSA, UMC, etc.)
- Non-Protestant Christian (11) — those who are now Roman Catholic or Orthodox
- Unaffiliated (92) — those who identified themselves as atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious (SBNR) with no church activity, or belonging to a different faith
- Unclassifiable (26) — these people indicated they were “spiritual but not religious,” but reported active church attendance and did not fit statistically with other groups

The third phase of research was designed to give nuance to the first two phases through focus groups. From July to August of 2018, nine young adult focus groups were conducted (some online and some in person) with 39 young adult discussants. These discussions followed a question guide designed by Ken Ohlemeyer, who also trained several different focus group leaders. The topics included focused discussions on subjects such as what young adults look for in a church to be warm and welcoming, what does diversity mean in the context of a church, what do young adults think of the church, and how can the church better engage with young adults. While efforts were made to lead focus groups with those who had left the church, all those who attended these focus groups were active LCMS young adults.

## Findings and Conclusions

**Our research, including our overall retention, mirrored the research done in the greater religious research community.**

Both surveys were designed through the distinct lens of Lutheran theology and ecclesiology. Yet, there was no meaningful difference between what we found and what other research has shown. The retention rate of young people in the LCMS is consistent with other surveys. One-third of young people confirmed in 2004–2006 were retained in the LCMS into young adulthood. One-third were occasionally at their home congregation, a part of another church body or no longer attend church at all. The whereabouts of the final one-third were unknown to the church leader, or those helping them, who took the survey.

**Parents and congregations must prepare for and engage young people during time of transition and crisis.**

Only 55% of active LCMS young adults agree that their home congregation ministered to them during times of life transitions. This was the strongest response of any group. We saw this impact particularly after high school graduation. Active LCMS young adults report that their weekly worship attendance dropped from 88% to 66%





after high school graduation but it recovered to 74% by age 22–30. In contrast, those no longer attending church report that their weekly worship attendance dropped from 68% to 16% after graduation and that number drops to almost zero in young adulthood. Transitions, such as graduation, are critical moments when congregations and parents can help a young person find a new church home or establish a new adult relationship with their existing congregation.

Young adults reported that crisis situations were often times when faith and community were deepened or lost. Fifteen percent of young adults noted a crisis event as a pivotal faith moment. These pivotal faith moments could be positive or negative, often depending on the response of family and/or the church to the crisis. Nine percent of non-LCMS respondents mentioned having their doubts or questions ignored or dismissed. Congregations and parents should not be surprised by transitions or crisis. Instead, they should develop deep and open relationships. Congregations should work to train and prepare parents for how to utilize these moments for deepening faith and community.

**Ministry should prioritize long-term relationships, embracing its particular context.**

Of the congregations who responded to our survey,

23% reported that they did not have accurate records of junior confirmations. Only 28% reported having digital records. Congregations without usable records limit their ability to track and minister to members, especially those on the margins. Along with good record keeping, church workers and laity need to actively hand off and take on people during congregation transitions. When the pastor who confirmed the young people in 2004–2006 was still present at the time of the survey, there was a 35% LCMS retention rate. If there had been a pastoral transition from 2004 until the survey, the LCMS retention rate was only 24%. Pastors who had been present in 2004–2006 had a 25% rate of not knowing where a confirmand was today in contrast to 43% if there had been a pastoral transition in that time.

Within the congregational study, we asked if there had been any significant changes to programs, curriculum and staffing across Christian education since 2004. We found that changes in programs and curriculum showed no meaningful increase or decrease in retention. However, congregations that added youth ministry staff experienced higher rates of retention (in the LCMS) into adulthood (34%) than congregations with no change (28%) and congregations which reduced youth ministry staff (19%). Adding staff also decreased the rate of young people leaving before high school graduation. Twenty-





three percent left the congregations who added staff, 32% with no staffing change, 38% for congregations who reduced youth ministry staff. We recognize that the data does not speak to causality. However, it gives a strong indication that both strong resourcing for youth ministry and the presence of long-term relationships with church leaders has a positive impact on retention.

Congregations cannot control some of the factors that increased or decreased retention. Small and rural congregations had a higher rate of knowing where young adults are currently worshipping. Larger and suburban congregations had a higher rate of LCMS retention. Large congregations also tend to have the largest proportion of young adults who have joined the church in adulthood. This merely means that congregations ought to embrace their unique context.

### **Parents play a critical role in young adult faith development and retention.**

Parents remain the number one person who impacts the faith lives of young people. Nearly 3 in 4 young adults (72%) listed at least one parent as one of the most influential people in their lives. While that influence was usually positive, those who left the LCMS were more than twice as likely to say a parent had a negative influence (13% vs 5%).

Today's Active LCMS young adults were the most likely to see a high level of faith practiced by their parents. This included frequent Bible reading at home, praying as a family, regular church attendance of both parents together (continuing even today), and at least one parent having a service or leadership role in the church. Of all the other profiles, parents of Nominal LCMS are least likely to be leaders in the church, read the Bible with their children and attend worship regularly now or in the past. Young people cannot emulate faith behavior they don't see. When parents don't prioritize worship and congregational engagement, young people won't either.

Today's Active LCMS were also the most likely to report having a good relationship with parents in high school. They related well with parents in general, specifically with dad. They felt they could talk to both parents about life issues and could talk openly with at least one parent about faith. They felt safe bringing up their questions and doubts to their parents. When parents are open to tough conversations about life and faith, young people are more likely to stay in the church.

### **Engaging youth and young adults in service and leadership increases retention in the LCMS.**

The congregational survey asked the age of their youngest leader and what role that leader has. Fifty-seven



percent of congregations reported their youngest leader was under 32. The leadership roles described were not exclusively staff or board members. Many were lay leaders with meaningful roles such as volunteer youth leaders, Sunday school teachers and board members. This age proved to be an important threshold related to retention.

Congregations with a leader under 30 years old showed increased retention compared to those with only older leaders. Churches with a leader under 30 reported both a higher rate of young adults retained in their home congregation and a lower rate of young adults leaving before graduation. Having a leader under 30 increased the number of young adults who are still worshipping in the LCMS, even if they have moved and changed congregations. This impact is not influenced by congregations simply having more young adults overall. Having young leaders helps retain children and teens through graduation and into young adulthood.

**Congregations must be safe places for young people to wrestle with life and faith in order for them to faithfully reach out to today's culture.**

Throughout the survey we saw a strong dividing line over social and theological issues for those within the LCMS, in other church bodies and outside the church. "Object to the LCMS over a social issue" was the top reason mentioned in open-ended responses for Mainline Protestant (64%) and Unaffiliated (59%) and was third highest response for Evangelical Protestant (26%) young people. Active LCMS young adults hold very high rates of agreement with LCMS doctrine. For example, 40% of Nominal LCMS young adults disagree with ordaining women while 78% of Active LCMS young adults disagree. Also, 38% of Nominal LCMS young adults disagree that homosexual activity is OK while 87% of Active LCMS young adults disagree. Forty-seven percent of Nominal LCMS young adults disagree with a woman's right to abortion while 85% of Active LCMS young adults disagree.

Active LCMS young adults also showed signs that they had been able to ask hard questions and have challenging conversations within their church. We also found 72% of Active LCMS young adults agreed there was a person at church who was "safe" to talk with. Active LCMS were least likely to report feeling judged by the church (85% Unaffiliated; 57% Nominal LCMS; 57% Mainline Protestant; 29% Evangelical Protestant; 25% Active LCMS). They were also the most likely to say my church looks out for my best interest (18% Unaffiliated; 44% Nominal LCMS; 37% Mainline Protestant; 42% Evangelical Protestant; 57% Active LCMS.) In an increasingly post-Christian world, young people need our support to address the new or unique challenges to be a Lutheran Christian. ■

“People stay in the church, in my experience, because of the innate sense of belonging. If you find that you no longer need that stable community, having found it elsewhere, there is not much incentive for members to stay.”

25-year-old female  
Atheist

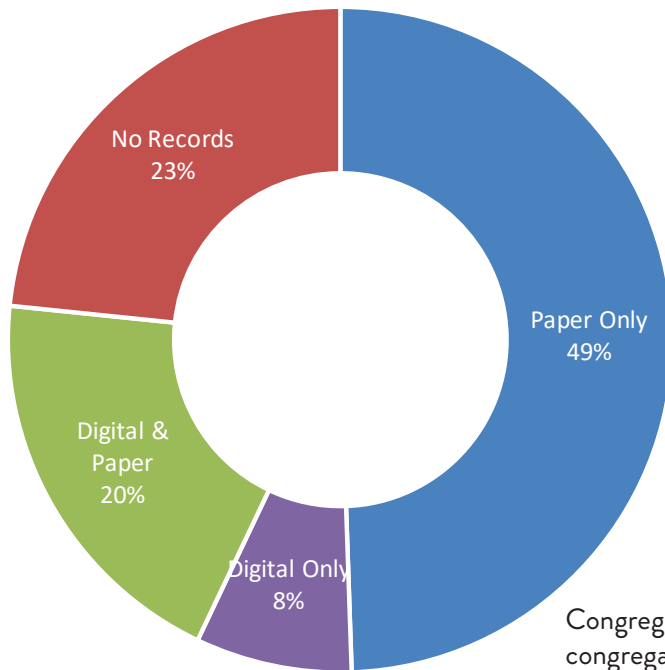


# Unintentional Neglect: KEEPING TRACK OF A GENERATION

*by Dr. Kevin Borchers*

**M**aybe you remember a time from your childhood when you were shopping with one of your parents, either in a store or at a mall. While Mom was busy with her shopping, your childhood sense of curiosity or adventure resulted in you becoming separated from her. Maybe something you wanted caught your attention and you went to check it out, or the center opening of that circular rack full of clothes looked to be the perfect hiding place, as long as you remained silent and still. Before Mom knew it, you were gone. You were just being a child, but in her eyes, you were lost. Panic set in and all attention was focused on finding you and making sure that you were safe and sound.





Congregational Survey's Response to 2004-2006 Record: 70% of congregations have paper records from confirmations in 2004-2006, but nearly a quarter kept no useable records.

*We know we should do a better job of keeping track of where our youth and young adults are after they are confirmed and graduate from high school. We also know we could be more diligent in staying connected with them. However, so many other things get in the way or prevent us from fulfilling our responsibility to tend the flock, and they just slip through the cracks and are gone.*

A similar story involving teens and young adults has unfolded in many churches for decades. Sadly, though, the children being lost are Confirmation age up to young adults, and many are not being found. Our recent research showed that one-third of the young adults between the ages of 24 to 28 who were confirmed in an LCMS congregation continue to actively participate in that same church or another LCMS congregation once they reached adulthood. However, that same research uncovered that nearly 25% of the congregations responding to the survey kept no written records of Confirmations and did not know if the young adults were actively living out their Confirmation vows in an LCMS, or any other, Christian congregation. Not knowing if or where younger members of our congregations participate in the life of the Church in adulthood is a serious spiritual matter for which local congregations can take steps to support.

Responsible parents would never willingly avoid knowing where their 14- to 18-year old daughters or sons are. Not knowing their children's whereabouts would be neglectful. When parents do lose track, it is usually unintentional. In the same way, congregations that lose track of young adults or have no knowledge if or where those young adults are worshiping and living out their faith often do so unintentionally. Their confirmed young people simply slip through the cracks and go missing. No one ever meant for it to happen. It was unintentional. For this reason, we have referred to it as "unintentional neglect," and it's something we can improve upon in our care for God's children.

In Confirmation classes we often talk about sins of commission—the thoughts, words, and actions that

we know go against God's will, and sins of omission—those things that we know are right but we fail to do. Unintentional neglect as we shepherd God's children is like those sins of omission. We know we should do a better job of keeping track of where our youth and young adults are after they are confirmed and graduate from high school. We also know we could be more diligent in staying connected with them. However, so many other things get in the way or prevent us from fulfilling our responsibility to tend the flock, and they just slip through the cracks and are gone. We did not mean for it to happen, but it did. So what do we do about it?

The key is relationships—both building and maintaining them. We need to remember that our connection with them as parents, pastors, DCEs, church staff, and volunteers in our Sunday schools, youth and young adult ministries, and as members of the family of faith in which our sons and daughters grow in years and are formed in the Christian faith does not end when they reach certain milestones. As families of faith, congregations united by Christ in Word and in Sacrament, we can work together, each one called by God to be members of His family, to keep the family connected. This is true whether they are at home or away, living with parents or on their own.

Unintentional neglect is avoidable if we capitalize on the opportunities we are given. Relationships with children, youth, and young adults often begin through some programmatic activity or event sponsored by the church like Sunday school, Confirmation instruction, or youth group. However, those relationships must be nurtured organically, as one would care for a seed planted

in a garden, by making time to connect person-to-person with each daughter, son, and parent. Dedicated time and building trust are required so that we know them and them us. Just as Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

Not only do congregations need to build relationships, especially pastors and others directly involved in the professional ministry of the church, but they also need to keep and maintain accurate records. Those in professional ministry can and often do receive Calls to other congregations. Ministry volunteers move elsewhere for various reasons. Clear and accurate records make it possible for replacements, both Called and volunteers, to have the information they need to continue to maintain a congregation’s ministry connection with its sons and daughters. Without such information, they enter into that ministry situation lacking some important information they need for the task of tending the flock.

One way congregations can work to address this issue is by keeping accurate records in a membership database that is regularly audited and up-dated. Contact information for members of each year’s Confirmation class and their families could be included. This general information could be supplemented by maintaining a record of connection with the congregation, which could possibly record the frequency of worship attendance, participation in the Lord’s Supper, and participation in youth ministry or other congregational ministry-related activities. This could provide a means for tracking individuals’ ongoing connection with the congregation.

Once again, personal relationships maintain these connections, but quality record keeping can provide us with reference points to note any changes in those relational connections. Such record keeping practices provide ministry leaders with information that can be utilized to not only better maintain relational ministry connections, but also provide support for ministry transitions, be those changes in Called staff or the transition of the young person to college or another similar move.

Ultimately, the devil and our sinful nature stand behind the unintentional neglect that leads everyone involved to sin. Therefore, let us first repent of our sins and remember the forgiveness won for us by the sacrificial death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on the cross. Let’s remember that it is by His resurrection that we receive newness of life. By His ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, we are led and enabled to turn from our sins and live the sanctified lives to which He calls us.

We recognize that even the best-kept set of records cannot—and our most intentional efforts are not—guarantee that a young person will remain connected to the Church. That is most assuredly the work of the Holy Spirit. Our work in ministry, whether administrative or relational, has but one purpose: to support God’s work in the lives of our children, brothers, and sisters through His means of grace.

We pray that God would empower and equip us to be more mindful of those whom He has placed in our care. May the Holy Spirit enable us to reverse any tendencies toward unintentional neglect and to be His servants, intentionally called to care. ■

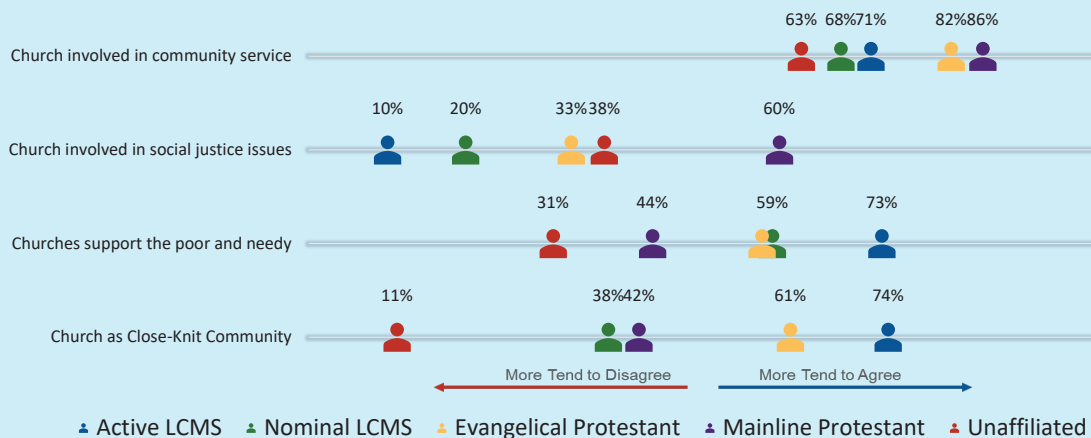
“There is not [an LCMS church] close to where I am currently living/attending school. I emailed a leader of our congregation inquiring of the nearest church and never received a reply. I have also reached out regarding simple things like receiving offering envelopes and never got an answer.”

20-year-old female  
currently attending an ELCA church



# discussion guide:

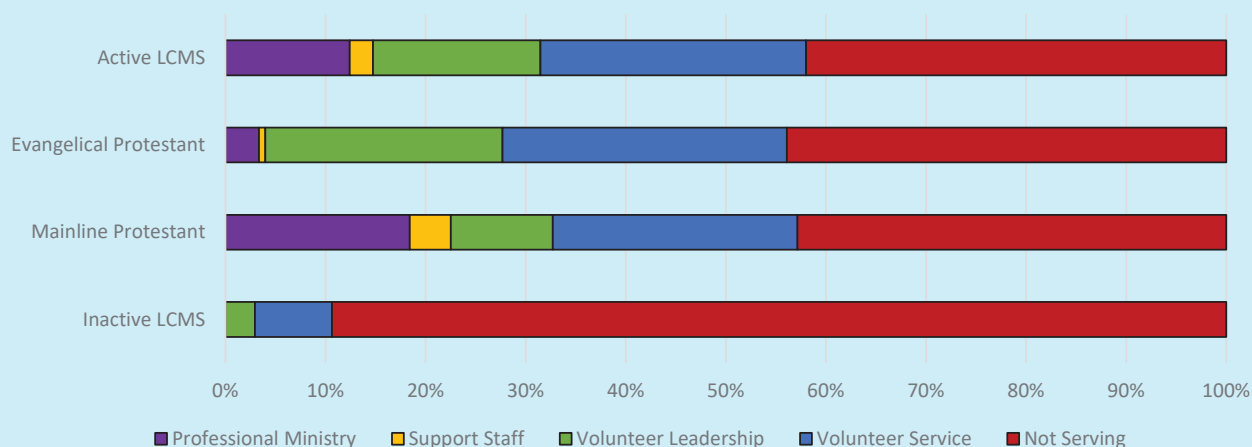
## FORMING A STRONG RELATIONAL COMMUNITY



Strong relationship with ministry staff in the local congregation is key, but to really extend the impact of a congregation and maintain the connection with young adults over their formative years we need help. Fuller Youth Institute recommends 5 adults relationally invested for every 1 child/youth/young adult. As a staff or leadership team consider the following questions together as a group:

1. If we were to get an honest assessment from young adults who have been a part of our ministry, would they describe our church as a close-knit community? Why or why not?
2. What can be strategically done to empower and release members of our congregation to form a more close-knit community that will care personally for children and youth into and through young adulthood more intentionally?

### Percent in Volunteer and Leadership Positions



\*The above data also does not include many Mainline (22%) and Inactive LCMS (34%) who indicated they are currently not tied to a specific congregation.

1. How can our church engage young adults relationally in service both in the church and community?
2. How can we build intergenerational connections through service and general life together as a community of faith?

# PREPARE



## LCMS YOUTH MINISTRY



LCMS Servant Events  
@LCMSServantEvents  
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# Volunteer Longevity

**L**ast year I met a lovely woman at a district high school retreat. I was helping with servant events and got to chatting with her as her teens filled mason jars with soup fixings. At one point she mentioned that the kids she brought were probably sick of her and longed for a hipper, younger youth leader. After all, she had been with these kids since she taught their kindergarten Sunday School.

I couldn't hold back. "No!" I practically shouted. "Your commitment to these young people is huge, exceptional! You have no idea what a gift you are." At this point, I realized by her face that perhaps my response was a tad aggressive. I took it down a notch and tried to explain my extreme enthusiasm. After all the research we have done on young adults in the LCMS, I needed her to know just how critical deep, long-term relationships are for ministry.

*by Julianna Shults*

*In a world where nothing stays the same, teens will struggle with demanding schedules, identity crisis, changing relationships and more. Having consistent people who are praying for and investing in youth makes an impact.*



**What I told her boils down to this: your longevity as a professional church worker or as a volunteer isn't just good for you; it is important for young people now and in the future.**

One important finding from our 2017-2018 LCMS Youth Ministry research was that the tenure of the person who took the survey (overwhelmingly pastors) had an impact on the retention of young people. If the person who took the survey was present in the congregation in 2004-2006, they knew the whereabouts of approximately 75% of the young people confirmed. If they were not present, they only knew where 55% of those young people were now. Those who had been in the congregation since 2004 showed a 35% LCMS retention rate while those who had a shorter tenure had a 24% LCMS retention rate.

The study was only able to identify the influence of the primarily pastors who took the survey. However, it is not hard to draw the conclusion that the same impact could be found in long-serving DCEs, other church workers, and volunteer leaders. In fact, throughout all phases of the 2017 research we found that long-term relationships, not programs, played an important role in young adult retention.

**When young people are personally known and cared for, they can ask difficult questions and receive support through crisis.**

Through relationship the Holy Spirit helps leaders articulate Law and Gospel when it is most needed. Youth don't need flashy new programs or the hippest young leader who is here today and gone tomorrow. In a world where nothing stays the same, teens will struggle with demanding schedules, identity crisis, changing relationships and more. Having consistent people who are praying for and investing in youth makes an impact.

**When it comes to relationships, the role of long-term volunteers cannot be understated.**

There are a variety of statistics out there, but the majority say the average tenure for a professional youth worker is around 4 years and for a pastor around 6 years. Youth Specialties found that 39% of professional youth workers are in their first three years of ministry at their church and only 12% have been in ministry at the church after more than a decade. Some professional church workers are blessed to stay in the same congregation for 10 or more years. Many find that ministry becomes richer through relationship over time. Yet, there are often





very good reasons why a professional church worker may not stay in the same congregation for many years. As church workers move and transition, it is the long-serving volunteers who ensure young people stay tied to the church.

**One way some congregations are encouraging long-term relationships is by assigning volunteers to groups of children and teens rather than to an age level.**

For example, an adult commits to a group of girls who they follow up the grade levels through high school, rather than for the fifth-grade class over several years. These adults must be ready to be engaged over the long run, but their role can make a huge difference in overall retention through transitions. Even more exciting, this is something that happen very naturally in smaller congregations and is a huge strength to their ministry.

**Another way we can encourage long-term relationships is by investing in our professional church workers and volunteers.**

Congregations must encourage balance and self-care rather than allow for people to be pulled beyond their capacity. Leaders must develop shared trust, respect and vision between the pastor, other church workers and volunteers. Long-term volunteers need pacing, training, encouragement, and support as they take on the task of pouring into young people. It's not easy, but it will pay off in the end.

**I will remind you as I did that volunteer: Don't dismiss what God can do through you when you commit to loving young people for the long-term.**

There are days when young people will test you, and you will think someone else could do better. Bible study might not have gone as smoothly as you hoped and maybe those youth were on Instagram and not their digital Bibles. Remember those things will be forgotten over time. What they won't forget is you and what you allow the Holy Spirit to do through you. Your investment from Kindergarten Sunday School through their lives reaps plentiful fruit. God will use your continued presence to remind young people of Jesus and of what he has done for us. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to young people in the church. ■

## Discussion Questions

- Who are the adults who consistently spend time with youth from your congregation and community? What are their roles? How do the youth view these adults?
- Which adults in your congregation have consistently volunteered their time in a dedicated manner to the youth in your church? What motivates them to continue serving?
- Who were the “other” adults from your childhood and adolescence who gave of themselves to connect you with Christ and the church?
- How long do adults who serve with youth in your congregation typically remain active in that service?
- What letter grade would you give your congregation for its care for the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of the pastor(s) and other church workers who serve?

When I was 9 my pastor at the time told me I could talk to him about difficult issues and he wouldn't tell my parents. I never took him up on it, but I needed to hear that in my life. I figured if God put people like that on Earth, he must be here for me and love me. I never doubted that again.

23-year-old transgendered  
LCMS Lutheran

Vocation is a calling for every age. With a right understanding of vocation, young leaders become an important part of serving God and each other.



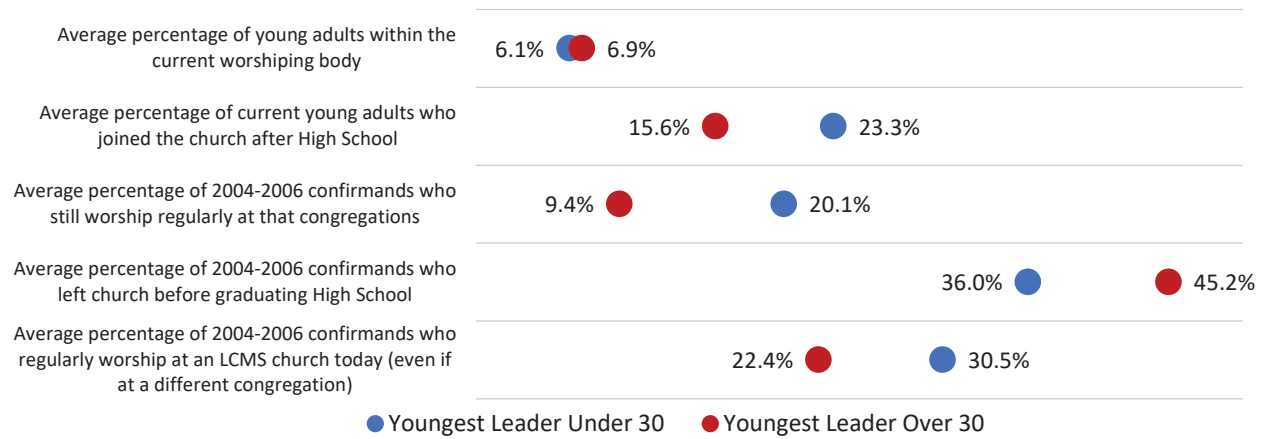
# Young Leadership Matters

*by Julianna Shults*

Millennials have taken a bit of a beating in our pop culture over the last few years. As they moved through their 20s and 30s, Millennials have been mocked, joked about, and criticized. Articles come out each month with some industry Millennials have “killed.” Their food choices are blamed for their financial difficulties. Boomers and Xers have shared publicly and privately their concerns over Millennials’ professional and leadership shortfalls. Millennials are entitled. They received too many participation trophies and don’t know how to work hard. They don’t know how to communicate well face-to-face. Millennials are selfish and aren’t invested in institutions.

The reality is that Millennials are different, but neither better nor worse, than generations before them. Every young adult sitting in your pew is different and cannot be boiled down to a stereotype. They are sinful humans trying to navigate a broken world in need of redemption from Jesus Christ.





*This effect is controlled for size of the congregation, so that is not influencing the correlation. Also, the percentage of young adults in the current worshipping body is statistically not a significant factor, so it is not influencing the other elements as well.*

Our world is changing at a tremendous rate. As a result, Millennials and Generation Z who follow them will challenge the Church as they move into leadership. God has gifted this generation as He has every generation with the tools to share the Gospel.

Our Congregational Survey asked the age of the church’s youngest leader and what role that leader has. We chose this question to echo one from our earlier research. We polled the Young Adult Volunteers at the 2016 LCMS Youth Gathering. 91.6% of Young Adult Volunteers at the Gathering say they feel equipped to serve their congregations. 25% of those YAVS report having a leadership role of any kind in their congregation.

Of the congregations who responded, 57% reported their youngest leader was under 32. This age proved to be an important threshold for retention. Congregations with a leader under 30 years old showed increased retention compared to those with only older leaders. Churches with a leader under 30 report a higher rate of young adults retained in their home congregation. They also show a lower rate of young adults leaving before graduation. Having a leader under 30 increased the number of young adults who are still worshipping in the LCMS, even if they have moved congregations. The first line of the chart above shows these impacts are not influenced by congregations simply having more young adults overall.

Truly, the impact is about empowering young leaders.

The leadership roles described were not exclusively staff or board members. Some were youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, and even ushers. The positive effect of young leadership in retention is also seen in other research. Barna’s research found that 45% of Millennials active in the church agreed, “I learned to view my gifts and passions as a part of God’s calling.” Only 17% of Millennials now inactive in the church agreed. In *Growing Young*, Fuller Youth Institute reports that growing, healthy churches can be characterized by empowering young people into leadership roles.

The importance of lifting young adults into leadership reminds us of the importance of vocation. Vocation gives us a critical understanding of how God uses us as His hands and feet in the world. Congregations should get a refresher course in vocation often. It is too easy to see our gifts, abilities and time as our own, and not as a part of God’s work in the world. Vocation is a calling for every age. With a right understanding of vocation, young leaders become an important part of serving God and each other.

Finding and empowering young leaders isn’t simple. Many of our congregations don’t have young adults actively worshipping. Perhaps the first step is to search for those young people who have walked away and reach out to new young adults. As you do, it may be tempting to immediately engage them in leadership. Before you raise up young leaders, ensure they are well grounded in their faith, attached to the vine that is Jesus Christ. If they aren’t regularly in worship and personal faith practices, take the time to encourage that growth before you lift them into leadership roles.

Existing church leaders can struggle to put aside their own ego or agenda to empower new leaders. Instead, young leaders are engaged in poor-fitting, powerless or token positions. Young adults can spot this a mile away. Asking them into leadership only to be decoration can lead them to avoid leadership in the future. Experienced leaders can be nervous and undercut young leaders. They hand off then take back responsibility. When experienced leaders anticipate failure rather than success, the young leader knows they are not trusted and will quickly walk away.

Millennials can be the source of struggle as well. They are chronically over-prepared and under-utilized. Many are strapped with student debt and struggling to find success in the marketplace. They may pass on church leadership to prioritize work. They may turn down a leadership role they feel isn’t important. We may see similar struggles with Generation Z. A recent study

by Barna said that Gen Z identifies professional and academic achievement as most important to their sense of self. At its root, these generations feel immense pressure and often feel they aren't using their gifts and abilities like they could or should. The church and leadership within it can help form an identity in Christ that helps to right this distorted sense of disappointment and self-justification.

Millennials and Gen Z are less likely to show institutional affiliation. Rather, they are looking for a sense of authentic community and purpose to their service. Teens and young adults are likely to ask why a certain program or ministry is important. If they can't get an answer, they are unlikely to feel invested. Empowering young leaders may mean being open to challenging questions and new ideas. It also may mean redefining success together so that the church can share the Gospel in new ways. Young leaders can bring new energy and excitement to a ministry, but only if they can bring their unique thoughts and gifts.

Young leaders need mentorship and guidance, but done right, this can connect them into even deeper relationships and community. They do not need to be micromanaged, but they do need a listening ear and a safe space to learn. Make sure to debrief young leaders, especially after big responsibilities are done. It doesn't have to be formal or time consuming. New, young leaders need to have someone talk through the experience with them. Part of this debriefing will mean being honest about your leadership experience, both good and bad. They need to hear that you messed up a time or two before and lived to tell the tale. They also need to see confession and absolution practiced by you and other leadership when things go wrong. Unlike competitive academic and professional settings, young leaders should find the church is a safe place to lead, fail, and find forgiveness and redemption.

When I talk to high school students and young adults about leading in the church, I remind them to be patient with the process. Church structure, both written and unwritten, can be difficult to navigate. It can suck the enthusiasm out of the most seasoned leader. If they must be patient, you must be willing to help forge the way forward to keep leaders moving. Have their back when people struggle with new ideas and changes they propose. Give encouragement when they try something new and even when they fail.

For those who have empowered and supported young leaders, be encouraged. This action alone has a significant impact on the Kingdom of God. Not only does it use the gifts and skills of that leader, it helps children and teens have a vision for how they can serve in the near future. Embracing young leaders helps a congregation to stay vibrant and healthy. It has meaningful impact for the church today and tomorrow. ■

*This article was first printed in the Spring 2018 NADCE Quarterly.*

## Discussion Questions

- What is the average age of your congregation? Of your pastor(s) and church staff? Of your lay leaders?
- What is the age of the youngest church member in a leadership role? What is being or could be done to involve more young adults in congregational leadership?
- What concerns do you have about young adults serving in leadership in your congregation?
- What is something your congregation is not doing in ministry that a young adult might have the gifts, skills, or knowledge to make it happen?
- Who in your congregation would make a good leadership mentor for young adults?
- To what extent are adults currently serving in leadership open to young adults partnering with them in leadership roles?
- In what way(s) is your congregation equipping youth to form an identity in Christ that helps them develop skills to cope with disappointment and to have a proper view of success? What is being done to help them develop their identity in Christ?

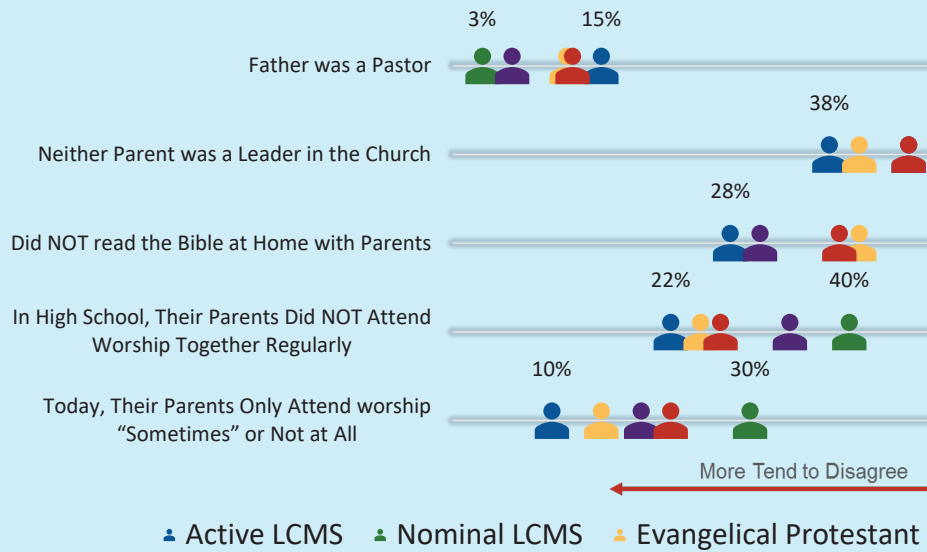
“I never found a church where I felt like I felt in where I'm living now. The congregation I attended for a while was just a little older than me, and I never felt like anyone cared about me. No one took the time to say hello or get to know me. I just didn't feel like I belonged.”

21-year-old female  
believes, but not affiliated with a church



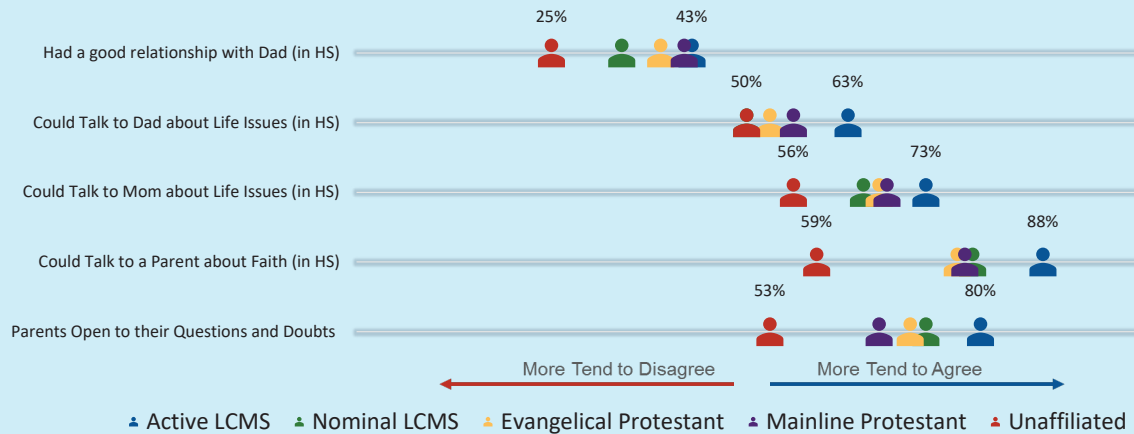
# discussion guide:

## POWER OF PARENTS



We all know that parents are the primary shapers of the faith lives of their children, yet at times the church unintentionally undercuts the power of this powerful influence. As a staff or leadership team consider the following questions together as a group:

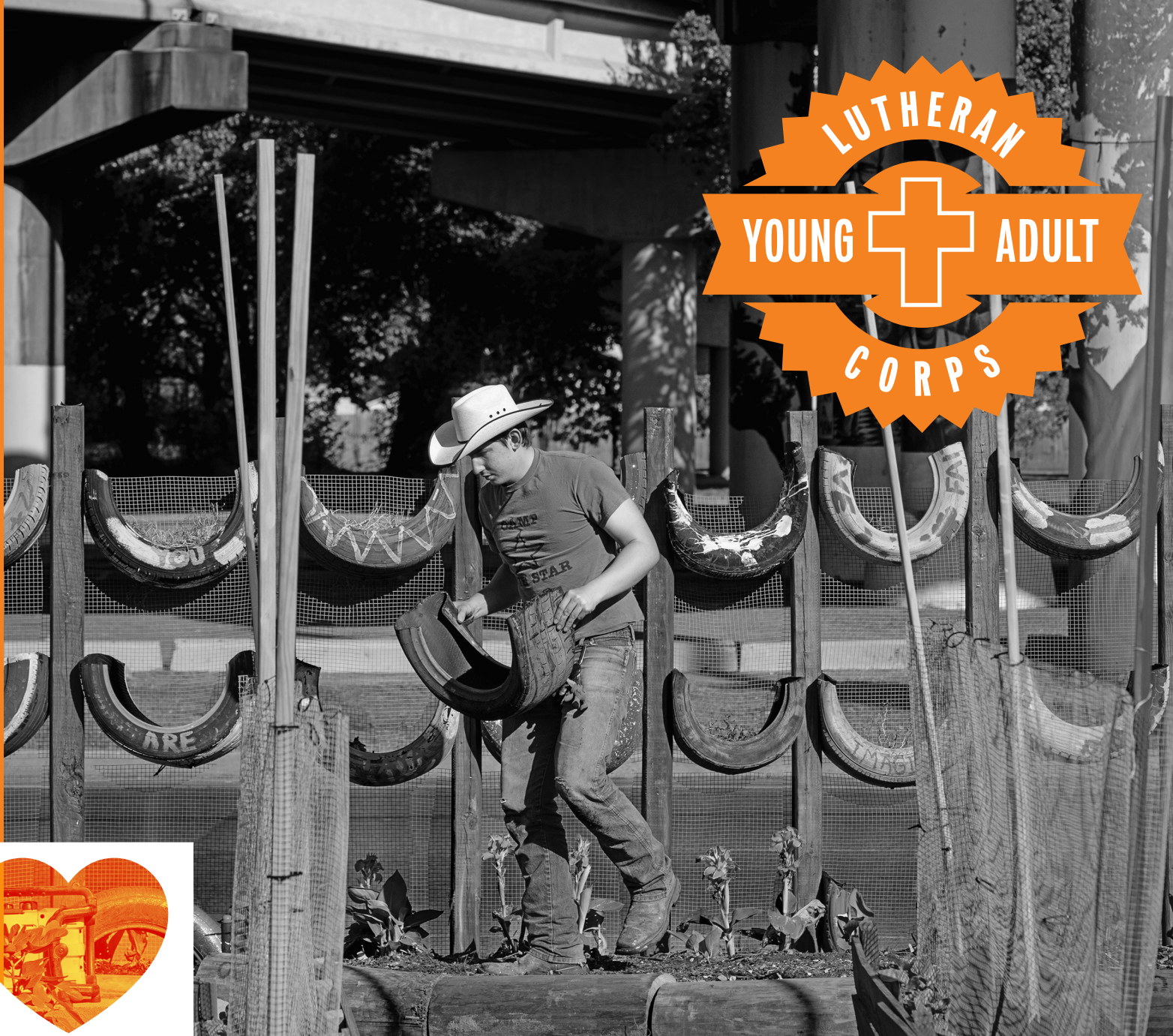
1. Thinking about the shape of what takes place on Sunday morning, what encourages and what discourages families from being in worship together?
2. Are there simple changes that might help better encourage families to worship together?
3. What do we do, or can we do, to help equip parents to more intentionally practice and teach the faith to their children?



*Data in circles indicate an overlap of data points.*

1. How might we better equip parents to be comfortable talking about faith and life issues with their children and teens?
2. What topics or life issues could our church provide to better equip or train parents?

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YOUNG + ADULT  
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LCMS YOUTH MINISTRY

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# Tough Conversations in the Home: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

**P**arenting pre-teens and teens is a full contact sport. Life comes at you fast. This is especially true for the parent/child relationship during these years. With the emergence and rapid growth of digital media, teens and pre-teens have incredible access to an almost incalculable reservoir of content. At times, keeping up on all the shifting sands of cultural influence seems hopeless. Yet, God's charge to train up our children in the way they should go (see Proverbs 22:6) has not changed. The need for children to be well taught has certainly not lessened. Perhaps, however, for some, a new strategy is needed.

Rather than attempting to become an expert on the general trends of the culture around us, as parents our role is to become experts merely in the cultural impact in our own homes. To do this, we need to develop top notch listening skills and strategies that will allow us to successfully engage productively in the many tough conversations that are likely to surface in our homes.

*by Dr. David Rueter*

*Inside you may be falling apart. The bomb you feared may have just been dropped, but outside you are maintaining your calm. When difficult subjects are surfaced by the young people in our lives, they may start the conversation with great fear about your reaction.*

Here are a few things to keep in mind to help you navigate tough conversations in your home:

**Tough conversations are good to have.**

Difficult and emotionally trying as they may be, actually having tough conversations with your teen or pre-teen is far better than not. Better that they come to you and you struggle through the conversation, than they believe that they cannot ask.

**Create an environment in which asking tough questions is accepted.**

In order for tough conversations to happen in the home, teens need to feel comfortable broaching the difficult subjects that they wrestle with. They need to know that their parents will listen to them and not just react.

**Practice being a non-anxious presence.**

Inside you may be falling apart. The bomb you feared may have just been dropped, but outside you are maintaining your calm. When difficult subjects are surfaced by the young people in our lives, they may start the conversation with great fear about your reaction. Keeping your own fears in check and not reacting or immediately condemning allows space for a full conversation to take place. If you are able to keep the conversation going, you will have time to share your fears and concerns in due time.

**Don't try and make it go away.**

Even if you do not want to hear it, if the issue is a matter of importance, you cannot will it away. You may be tempted to wait it out in the hopes that the struggle will pass like some sort of phase. That may well happen. Some struggles do turn out to be short lived; however, in the moment respect the seriousness with which the issue is presented. You may find that by listening you may well help your son or daughter to move on sooner than might otherwise have been likely.

**Listen deeply and ask clarifying questions.**

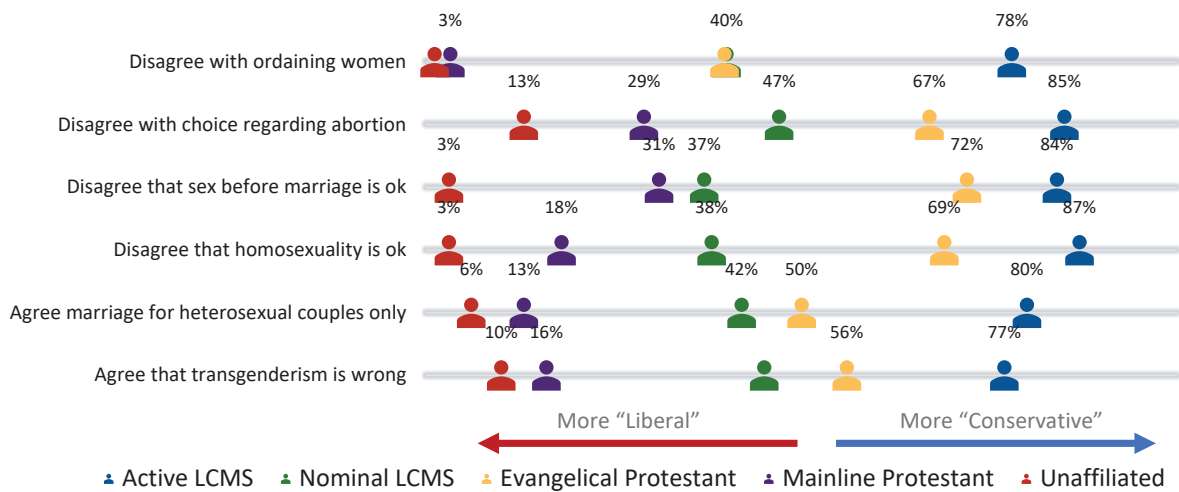
It may take some time to really understand what the core of the issue is that your son or daughter is bringing to you. Before you jump to a conclusion make sure that you have taken the time to assess whether you are truly hearing and understanding what is being said. Use classic counseling phrases like “What I hear you saying” or “Tell me if I am understanding this correctly” to help you make sure that you understand as well as to communicate you are not jumping to any conclusions.

**Take the time you both need.**

There is no rule that you must have an answer immediately. Unless someone is in immediate danger, it is completely fair to ask for time to think through, pray through, and study the Scriptures and other materials before offering an answer. Communicate that this is your way of taking their struggle seriously. Ask that no decisions be made while you do this and set a specific time frame for the next conversation, allowing you adequate time, but not so much that you appear to be stalling.







**Be transparent.**

As they grow into Christian adulthood, your children will need to be able to think through difficult subjects on their own and watch how you address subjects that challenge your faith and thinking. Being transparent means learning to reveal more and more of the behind the scenes thought processes that go into your own thinking. Keeping in mind the level of their own maturity, make sure you are appropriately open and honest.

**Remain faithful.**

In the midst of a tough conversation, regardless of the subject matter, it is essential as a Christian parent to remain faithful—faithful to your Christian faith and faithful to your calling to love and train up your child. There should be no doubt on the part of the teens and/or pre-teens in your house that you love them and love the Lord and that the two are never mutually exclusive. ■

**Discussion Questions**

- What is your congregation doing to equip parents with communication skills and the information they need to have tough conversation with their sons and daughters?
- How is your congregation helping parents take resources like the Small Catechism, worship experiences, and congregational Christian education into the home?
- What are the topics that your congregation should be helping parents to address? Who should be responsible for identifying, obtaining, and sharing this information?
- What are we doing to equip parents to confront their sons and daughters in love and to work through conflict in an appropriate way?
- What are the topics that have been considered taboo in the past, but should be addressed by church leadership and parents in the home?

“I didn’t feel safe asking questions and having doubts about my faith/the denomination. I felt like when I brought up issues, I was answered with condescension. ...I felt like there was a fear whenever I brought up other ideas. Since no LCMS friends wanted to talk about the things that mattered to me, I slowly found new friends to talk with and connect with.”

29-year-old female  
Agnostic



# Warmth, Challenge & Grace

*by Julianna Shults*

**T**he word “safe” truly doesn’t describe the church and is not the “safe space” our culture promotes. Instead it provides a place of warmth, challenge, and grace all focused around what Jesus Christ as done for us on the cross.

**T**he term “safe space” has gotten thrown around a lot lately in educational and social settings. The term has been used to define various kinds of spaces, especially on places like university campuses. Some are free of topics that may create real injury to those struggling with mental health issues. Others are unrealized utopian spaces free from any cultural bias and conflict. As our world becomes ever more divided, and conflict rises around us, young people are searching for a place where they can wrestle with questions, express doubts and receive true, reliable information. Is what they are searching for “safe space” or is it something else entirely?



The 2017 LCMS Millennial Research and subsequent focus groups found that the overall atmosphere of a church has an impact on faith resiliency and retention. In our recent focus groups with active LCMS young adults, we asked them to help define what it meant for the church to be a “safe”, “warm”, and “authentic” space. We soon learned that those words can be fraught with baggage. It was clear we needed very specific language around what a healthy, Christ centered church environment is.

Throughout the research, it was clear that the environment of the church was critical for faithful growth in God’s Word. Congregations are communities of believers can build trust, Christ-like relationships, and support that weather the storms of teenage and young adult years. Or they can develop an unhealthy atmosphere, making it easier for young people to walk away. While not all inclusive, we continue to circle these three words that best describe what young people told us helped keep them attached to the church community: Warmth, Challenge, and Grace.

Warmth is characterized by displaying Christ’s love for all people and a personal invitation be a part of the congregation. Warmth strives for every visitor to be greeted and made comfortable. A strong welcome helps dissipate confusion or distraction and allows their worship experience to be focused on God’s gifts for them. Our actions should reflect God’s love and desire for all to know Jesus as their savior.

Beyond the initial welcome, warmth happens when all Baptized members are consistently reminded they are an important part of the Body of Christ. In these communities of faith, stories of failure, repentance, God’s grace, and joy are told. People across generations are known and want to know others. God designed for us to see and reflect God’s love for us to others.

Challenge is characterized by a willingness to share the truth in love so that all may know and remain in the faith of Jesus Christ. Challenge doesn’t just let sin and conflict slide. It is willing to engage in tough spiritual conversations. Standing firmly in God’s Word, it faces the questions and confusion we experience living in the darkness of sin. These conversations start with good listening, and do not deflect difficult topics. Instead, they build relationships through honest, open discussion that is centered around God’s Word and promises.

The other opportunity to provide challenge comes as believers seek to live out their faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. Challenge doesn’t underestimate young people. Instead it gives them opportunity to live out their various vocations, even when it stretches them. It can be hard to give young people opportunities to serve and lead, especially when there is the potential for failure. Members should be encouraged to take the work of Christ seriously in their various vocations.

Grace is characterized by echoing God’s love and forgiveness of us to others. The words of confession and absolution should be our regular vocabulary, especially as young people struggle with faith. Young people are learning (and failing) so much so quickly. They need a community of believers that constantly reminds them of their God who loved and sent His Son for them. Grace creates an environment where questions are not feared, attacked or ignored. As young people struggle with faith, grace gives them support to address their concerns head on with faithful parents and supportive adults. It keeps their answers and identity focused on Christ rather than on sports, social media or other distractions.

The word “safe” truly doesn’t describe the church and is not the “safe space” our culture promotes. Instead it provides a place of warmth, challenge, and grace all focused around what Jesus Christ as done for us on the cross. Unfortunately, there is no program that will create this for your ministry. It is going to look different for every congregation. Yet, the effects are the same. You can start assessing where you are by asking key leaders to describe the congregation’s environment. Have other Lutheran congregations send someone to visit and ask for their feedback. Congregations can do significant things for youth ministry by seeking not safe spaces, but places of warmth, challenge and grace that constantly point young people to Christ. ■

## Discussion Questions

- As you begin to think about your congregation being or becoming a warm, challenging, graceful space for youth and young adults, what perceptions come to mind?
- What, if any, issues or topics do you believe you or others in the church are equipped to handle? Explain.
- Which issues or topics are you not equipped or prepared to handle? Explain.
- In what ways is your church consistent or inconsistent in the ways it handles different issues or topics? If it is inconsistent, how can we change our inconsistent practice to be in conformity with God’s Word and with each other?
- To what extent do the people in your congregation view it as a place where they experience warmth, challenge, and the unconditional love of God?

In a world where nothing stays the same, teens will struggle with demanding schedules, identity crisis, changing relationships and more. Having consistent people who are praying for and investing in youth makes an impact.



# How Parents Can Prepare their Adolescents FOR LIFE'S TRANSITIONS

*by Dr. David Rueter*

**W**hile there is nothing new under the sun, life is consistent in delivering changes. Being a parent means navigating life's changes and transitions with your children as they mature toward Christian adulthood. There is a good deal of research that suggests that it is times of transition that pose dramatic challenges to young people as they mature. Churches all too often see a decline in participation of youth as they transition from confirmation to high school and then from high school into college or a career.

The Christian home sees its own struggles during these times of transition. If our goal as parents is to see our children mature into Christian adults we need to work with them, slowly but consistently removing the scaffolding that has protected them. Times of transition are excellent opportunities for parents to help adolescents explore new horizons extending into their futures.

Here are a few ways parents can prepare themselves to help guide their adolescents through key transitions:

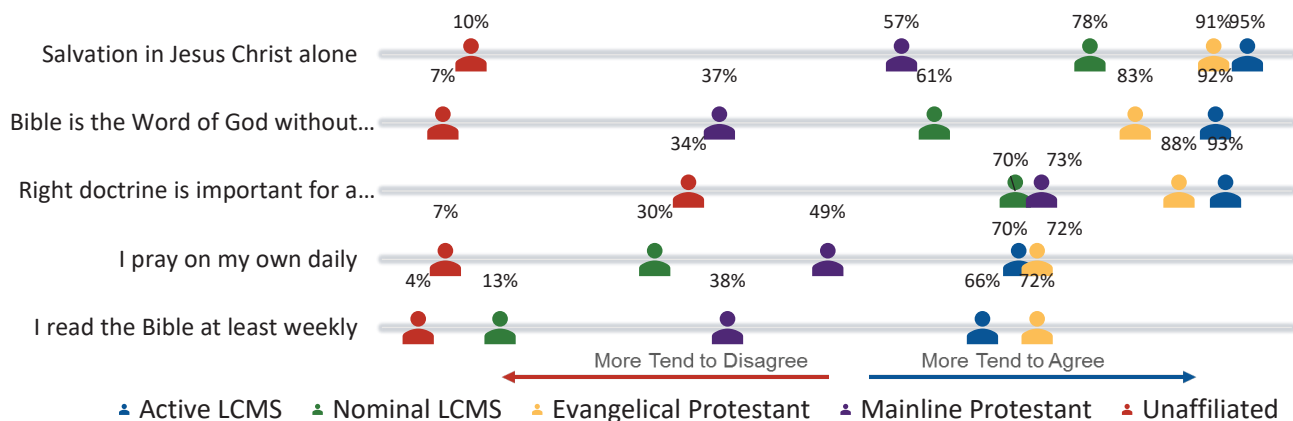


1. Mourn appropriately. Yes, your little one is no longer little and is now presenting you with increasingly adult situations. That's alright. This is truly normal and healthy. Yes, you can mourn your loss of their childhood, but you cannot force them back to an earlier time.
2. Be encouraging. Times of transition are nerve wracking for both you and your teen. They are as full of doubts as you are. Help to encourage them to have confidence to try new things. They can succeed in middle school, high school or college. Yes, they can find their first job, even if not right away.
3. Have a plan. The key transitions from childhood to adulthood should not come as a surprise. We can know when high school and college are coming. We may not know exactly when puberty is coming, but we can estimate and be ready. Think through your parenting style, your teen's personality, and the community that you live in as you discuss with your spouse or other key adults in your teen's life to formulate a plan with regard to managing the increasing autonomy and responsibility needed at each transition.
4. Keep listening. As your teen hits road blocks navigating transitions be present to listen to their frustrations. Listen first, advise later, perhaps only when they ask. Yes, you have wisdom to pass along, but it is only useful to them if they are ready to hear it.
5. Be the parent. Your relationship is changing. You will need to learn to treat your teen more and more like an adult, but you will not cease to be their parent. You will never be their cool friend and they do not need that from you.
6. Ask guiding questions. As you help your teen mature toward Christian adulthood, asking questions that help them reflect toward reaching appropriate conclusions will become a key tool. Rather than instructing, affirm what you see them doing well and then ask questions for aspects you think they need to reflect further upon. Make sure your questions are neither leading nor condescending. Ask questions with an honest desire to understand how they are thinking things through. This way you understand them better and they can learn to understand their own thought processes better as well.

7. Find the right balance. Each situation is different. You are different as parents from your own parents. Each of your children are different from one another. Moving a teen toward Christian adulthood is the art of seeking the balance between autonomy and responsibility that is right for him/her.
8. Be open to adjustments. You won't always get the balance right. Admit when you over played either autonomy or responsibility. Try not to place blame on your teen that is beyond their control. Make sure to continue to empower them, even if you need to pull back on the reigns for a time.
9. Celebrate milestones. Our culture lacks a clear celebration of the transition from childhood to adulthood. For each smaller marking on their road to Christian adulthood, celebrate with your teen. Reinforce both the responsibilities that are being placed on him/her as well as your confidence in their ability to master them. Your son or daughter is a child of God and is made to mature toward Christian adulthood. They are wired to succeed.
10. Keep Christ central. Faith practices in the home may change over time. Your 13-year-old will not likely be eager for bedtime stories, but that may just mean evening discussions in the catechism instead. Encouraging faith related discussions in the home can provide the foundation upon which your teen is able to understand the transition and how to keep Christ central in their lives through and beyond. ■

## Discussion Questions

- In what ways is your congregation working to make the home the center of faith formation and equipping parents for that task?
- What spiritual milestones do families celebrate with the congregation? Are there milestones not being celebrated with the family of faith (i.e., congregation) that should be celebrated? How might you make that a reality?



LCMS YOUTH MINISTRY

# RE SOU RCE

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Youth ESource  
@youthESource  
[youthesource.com](http://youthesource.com)

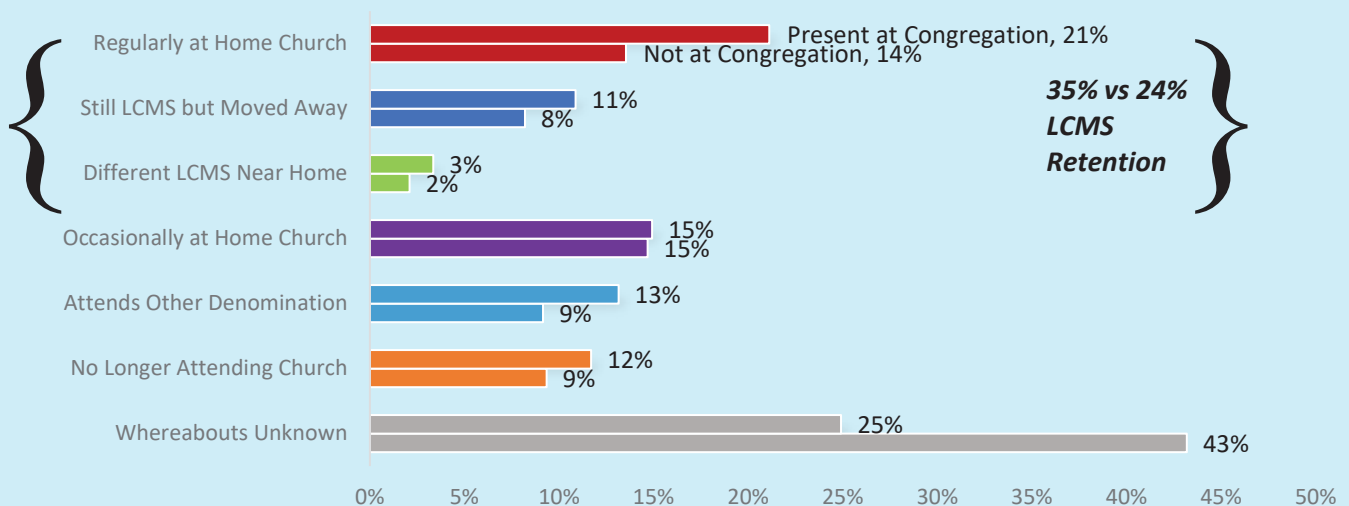




# discussion guide:

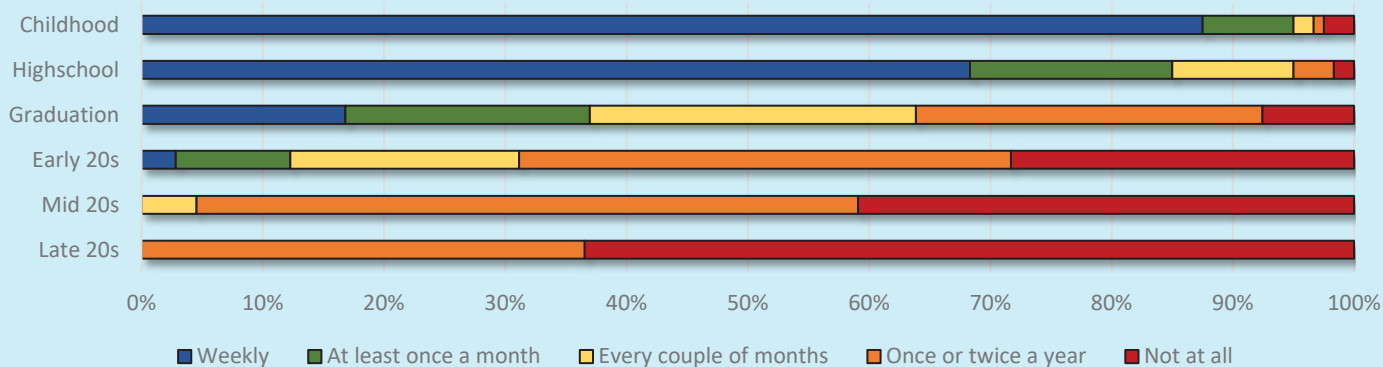
## A LIFELONG VIEW OF DISCIPLESHIP

Impact of Having the Same Pastor from 2004-2006 until the time of the Congregational Survey



Ministry is about relationship far more than programs. As church leaders we know this, yet at times we allow the busyness of programming for ministry to get in the way. As a staff or leadership team consider the following questions together as a group:

1. In what ways are church staff and leaders available to relationally connect with children, youth, young adults and their families?
2. Are there ways in which the busyness of ministry gets in the way of setting time aside to do this?
3. In what ways are the church staff and leadership intentionally tracking families as their children grow toward young adulthood in order to maintain both a ministry and relational connection?



1. How can relational connections be better maintained during times of transition?
2. How are we or can we attempt to track changes in worship and other congregational participation during times of transition?



# Ministering to Young People IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

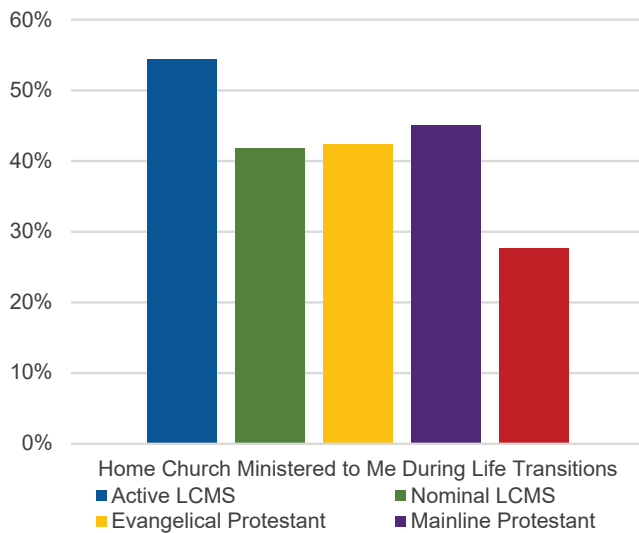


*by Rev. Mark Kiessler*

**T**ransitions can provide for growth in one's relationships with Jesus and His Church, or sometimes Satan uses these transitions to pull young people away from God's promises and means of grace and Christian relationships.

**Y**oung people naturally and regularly go through transitions in life. Ideally, families, Christian congregations, and Young people naturally and regularly go through transitions in life. Ideally, families, Christian congregations, and mentors can bring much-needed stability for a young person in this life phase. As teens move to adulthood, they may experience moving from middle school to high school, transitioning to college or the military, moving due to parents' employment, significant loss of a loved one, moving to find their own employment, changing of peer groups, or a mentor moving away. These occurrences can provide for growth in one's relationships with Jesus and His Church, or sometimes Satan uses these transitions to pull young people away from God's promises and means of grace and Christian relationships.





LCMS Youth Ministry research showed the importance of parents and congregations preparing for and engaging young people during times of transition and crisis. This article will focus on two transition scenarios where LCMS congregations can support parents and young people. The hope is that by faithfully connecting young people to God’s Word and Sacraments in the Church and Christian relationship, it increases the possibility that they will stay connected to Christ’s gifts and people beyond the youth years:

1. High School youth transition out of high school to college, workforce, or the military
2. Church Worker/Staff transitions whether it be contentious or a healthy transition

### From High School to the Next Phase

Only 55% of active LCMS young adults agree that their home congregation ministered to them during times of life transitions. This was the strongest response of any group, showing the propensity of youth who left for mainline denominations or other evangelical denominations, or those who have completely left the church, to receive even less spiritual care during times of transition. We saw this impact particularly after high school graduation. Active LCMS young adults report that their weekly worship attendance dropped from 88% to 66% after high school graduation, but it recovered in young adulthood to 74%.

In contrast, those no longer attending church report that their weekly worship attendance dropped from 68% to 16% after graduation, and that number becomes almost nothing in young adulthood. Transitions such as graduation are critical moments where congregations and parents can support a young person’s relationship with Jesus as they find a new church home or establish a new, adult relationship with their existing congregation.

Congregations and their pastors, DCEs, and other church workers have so much on their plate to minister to people in their midst. It’s easy to understand how college students, military personnel, or other young adults who have graduated from high school may easily become “out of sight, out of mind” in a ministry perspective. Of the congregations who responded to our survey, 23% reported that they did not have accurate records of Junior Confirmations from ten years ago. Only 28% reported having digital records. Congregations may struggle to be successful in ministering to individuals over their lifetime if there are no usable records and relational connection.

A few matters for LCMS congregations and church workers to consider:

- Parents and churches can consistently and continually speak of the importance of staying connected to Jesus, “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) throughout one’s life. Life circumstances may change, but Christ’s Church, hearing the Gospel, being assured of their forgiveness of sins, and studying God’s word provides stability through transitions.
- Churches can help parents and youth prioritize the spiritual environment, or growth opportunities, when choosing a college campus.
- Recognizing the blessings of temporal relationship formed in Christ, churches and parents can speak to the importance of young people finding Christian community on a campus or wherever they may be heading.
- Churches can actively engage their college students with an LCMS campus ministry or congregation, or another student ministry grounded in God’s Word. Our research showed that simply having a college campus close to a congregation did not increase the engagement of young adults. Rather, congregations should actively engage the students and invite them into the community. Churches can connect military members to LCMS congregations and chaplains.
- Churches can review how high school graduates are treated as members, considering these young people now face perhaps the most substantial transition in their spiritual life. Pray regularly, and publicly, for these students. Encourage them to hear and read the Gospel of Jesus and read His Word. Welcome them back at breaks and celebrate with them at milestones.
- Spiritually prepare students for this substantial transition. Discuss important matters like freedom, relationships, on-campus temptations, and possible onslaughts from academia. This could be especially important depending on a student’s major. Point them to God’s means of grace, and Jesus’ forgiveness and word of Promise, and the strength of the Holy Spirit.

- Put emphasis on young adults who stay in our general geographical vicinity and engage them in the Christian community now as full-fledged adults and invite them into leadership.
- Create a culture where connection with college students is valued and systematized through the four years of college so when they graduate, the congregation still has a relationship and are actively ministering to them.
- Home congregations take the initiative to walk with college students through the transition after college into a church home. Keep connected with them until they find a new, stable church home, even if outside the LCMS.

### Church Worker Transition

Both studies spoke to the importance of church workers in the lives of young people. (The faith practices and relationship with parents is the top indicator of retention.) Congregations that added youth ministry staff experienced higher rates of retention (in the LCMS) into adulthood (34%) than congregations with no change (28%) and congregations which reduced youth ministry staff (19%). Adding staff also decreased the rate of young people leaving before high school graduation. 23% left the congregations who added staff, 32% with no staffing change, 38% for congregations who reduced youth ministry staff. We recognize that the data does not speak to causality, but it gives a strong indication that when resourcing is increased towards youth ministry and the long-term relationship with a church leader is established, that has an impact on retention.

As one would expect, relationships between young people and their pastors, DCEs, and other staff are very important in the lives of individual young people and the life of the church. Millennials were asked to name three to five people who have been influential in their faith life. Along with parents, pastors, LCMS “youth ministers,” and LCMS teachers were some of the most influential in their faith life.

Another way to see the importance of these relationships is when the church worker leaves to take another Call or for a different reason. Church workers and laity need to actively hand off and take on people during congregation changes. In the congregational study, there was a 35% LCMS retention rate when the pastor had been present for their confirmation. There was only a 24% LCMS retention rate if the pastor had not been present. Pastors who had been present had a 25% rate of not knowing where a confirmand was today in contrast to 43% if the pastor was not. (Also, keep in mind the data provided above regarding the number of congregations who do not keep accurate or digital records. Good record keeping can be a vital tool for a church worker new to a congregation.)

A few matters for LCMS congregations and church workers to consider in church worker transition:

- Be encouraged and strengthened in the forgiveness of sins, given to us in Jesus Christ! Young people, pastors, church workers, and parents will fail and fall short in times of transitions. However, Jesus forgives us and bears fruit in us to show care and compassion for others.
- When church staff who work with youth transition





to another place, it is time well spent to bring closure for the youth and the worker. Honor the relationships which were built and have a solid understanding of how and when those relationships continue.

- When staff transition particularly affects ministry to young people (especially confirmed youth), give them specific and additional time to process, ask questions, and be engaged in the conversation about next steps.
- Church leadership should consider communicating directly to young people about church work transitions (in worship settings, at meetings where young people are present, or make a separate appointment to attend a youth event).
- Young people can be engaged in a church work transition or Call process. They can be given a voice and possibly a place on the Call Committee.
- Church workers new to a congregation can remind themselves the congregation's ministry didn't start with them. (Think of those young people confirmed 10 years ago...can lay people or other staff help build relationships with young people who are not currently connected with the church's ministry?)
- A new staff may be able to engage a family which has lost connection with the church. Perhaps, there was a personality conflict and the Holy Spirit may use a new person to start and form a relationship.
- Congregations should plan well for youth ministry interims and vacancies. Don't allow for a young person or family to "fall through the cracks" during these times of transition. The congregation works together to connect God's people to Jesus and it's not alone the work of pastor or other staff. ■

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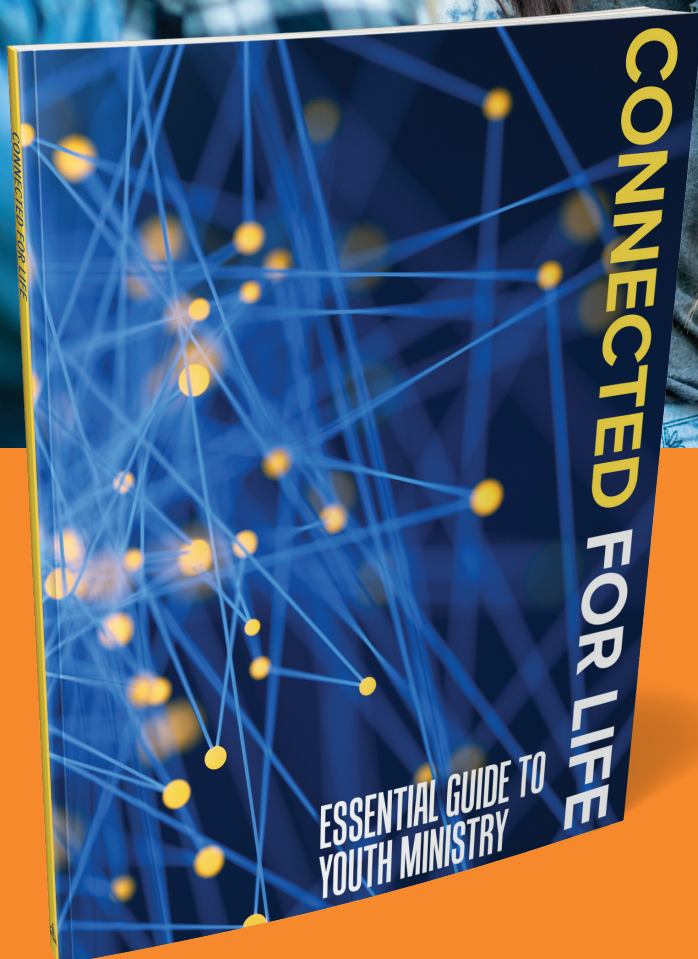
## Discussion Questions

- Who in your congregation is or could be responsible for proactively maintaining relationships with young adults following high school graduation and as they leave home?
- What resources does your congregation provide these individuals to do their job?
- As young adults leave to continue their education or for other reasons, what is your congregation doing to connect your young adults with other pastors and congregations in their new locations?
- What is being done to inform pastors or congregations that your young adults are coming to their community?
- What should be done in each of the previous instances to ensure young adults get connected with a faith community in their new location?

I struggled with my faith in college because I was a science major and science is pretty hostile towards religion. I had a wonderful Pastor guide me through this time. He provided me many tools and I now enjoy reading apologetic, scientific, Christian authors.

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