

# GROWING YOUNG

**SIX ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES**  
TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE DISCOVER AND LOVE YOUR CHURCH

**KARA POWELL, JAKE MULDER, AND BRAD GRIFFIN**



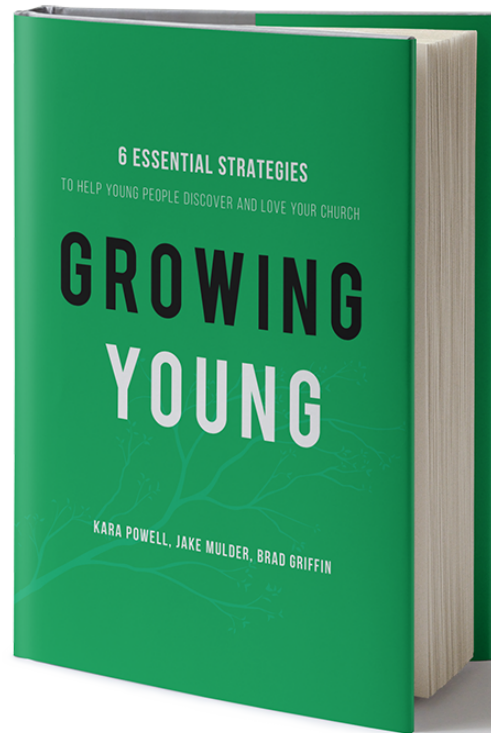
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To Nathan, Krista, and Jessica Powell;

Will Mulder;

and Anna, Kara, and Joel Griffin.

You inspire us to be better followers of Jesus.  
You keep us laughing and humbly seeking God.  
Every day you help us grow and keep us young.



# 1. Growing Young

## *What Congregations Are Doing Right*

A lot of my friends don't really want to go to their church. But we want to be here, and the older people in our church can see that . . . so they want us to be here. Our whole church treats us like we're the church of today, not just the church of the future.

—Ashlee, age 17

Growing old is our default. It happens naturally. And inevitably.

We see the results of growing old when we look in the mirror.

We see the effects of growing old when we look around our congregations.

With age comes great wisdom and beauty. Decades of burrowing in the love and grace of Jesus give the mature members of our faith communities a network of deep roots. Year after year, season after season, their ongoing commitment to love God and others yields a rich harvest.

Old isn't bad. We love old. We just don't think it's the whole story.

If your church is like many, you have bare spots. Holes created by the teenagers and young adults missing from your congregation. You see them on Friday night at the local movie theater and Saturday morning at the neighborhood coffeehouse, but they are absent from your Sunday morning worship services. These bare spots make your church feel incomplete.

Maybe your congregation's bare spots represent more than just missing young people. Perhaps across generations your church isn't growing as you wish. You may be a senior leader trying to hide your disappointment as you stand to preach and think to yourself, "Where *is* everyone?" Or you're a church member noticing it's now easier to find a preferred parking space before your worship services. Regardless of your role, your church's energy and attendance aren't what they used to be or what you would hope.

Those of you who are part of a growing church likely wish it was growing faster. And yet with that growth, you still want your congregation to feel close and intimate. You are thrilled with the new faces, but you don't want to lose the relational glue that drew you all together in the first place.

Or perhaps you are blessed to be in a congregation bursting with young people. You love how the Spirit is drawing them. But you want to make sure that they don't merely consume what you offer. You want them to be unleashed to join—and help lead—God's redemptive work in the world.

The truth is, every church needs young people. Their passion enriches the soil around them. The curiosity they bring to Scripture and the authenticity they bring to relationships keep your church's teaching fresh and fellowship fruitful.

Young people also need a thriving church. A thriving church both grounds them in community and sends them out to serve.

Your church needs young people, and they need your church. One without the other is incomplete.

## The Alarming Reality of Congregations in America

If you're wondering why your congregation is aging, shrinking, or plateauing, you're not alone. Almost weekly, someone at Fuller Theological Seminary quotes this powerful axiom from beloved senior trustee Max De Pree: "The first job of a leader is to define reality."<sup>1</sup> The unfortunate reality is that most churches are not growing, and they aren't getting any younger.

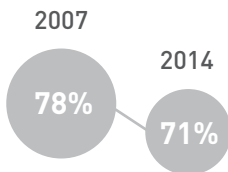
### *Church Attendance Is Declining*

According to an extensive survey by the Pew Research Center, the share of adults in the US who identify as Christians fell from 78 percent to 71 percent between 2007 and 2014. The corresponding increase in those who identify as "religiously unaffiliated" (meaning atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular") jumped by almost seven points, from just over 16 percent to 23 percent.<sup>2</sup>

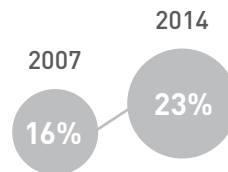
This well-publicized "Rise of the Nones" varies by denomination. Mainline Protestantism, including the United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Churches USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Episcopal Church, has experienced the

#### RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN AMERICA 2007–2014

##### Identify as Christians



##### Religiously Unaffiliated



greatest dip in numbers. From 2007 to 2014, mainline Protestant adults slid from 41 million to 36 million, a decline of approximately 5 million.

Roman Catholic adults fell from 54 million to 51 million, a drop of nearly 3 million.

Adults in evangelical denominations (such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and the Presbyterian Church in America), as well as adults in nondenominational churches with evangelical leanings, grew from 60 million to 62 million. While that might seem like something to celebrate, we should hold our kudos. Although the total number of evangelicals has increased, the percentage of Americans who identify as evangelicals has actually decreased almost 1 percent from just over 26 percent to just over 25 percent.

Even though these shifts represent major downturns in three of our nation’s largest Christian traditions, not all denominations are experiencing a slump. Historically black Protestant denominations, such as the National Baptist Convention, the Church of God in Christ, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Progressive Baptist Congregation, remain relatively stable at almost 16 million adults.<sup>3</sup>

To summarize, *no major Christian tradition is growing in the US today.*<sup>4</sup> A few denominations are managing to hold steady, but that’s as good as it gets.

### *Congregations Are Aging*

Those who study demographics believe the decline in overall church attendance is linked with young people’s religious practices, or lack thereof. According to 2001 US Census Bureau data, adults ages 18 to 29 comprised 22 percent of the adult population. Yet that same age group represents less than 10



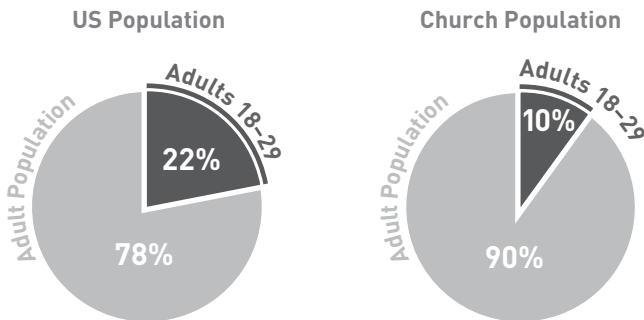
percent of church attendees nationwide. Evangelical Protestant congregations have the highest concentration of young adults at 14 percent, followed by Catholic parishes at 10 percent, and mainline Protestant congregations at 6 percent.<sup>5</sup>

The last handful of years has brought major changes to the faith of young Latinos, one of the fastest-growing ethnicities in the US. From 2010 to 2013, the number of 18- to 29-year-old Latinos who identified as Roman Catholics dropped from 60 percent to 45 percent, while those who identified as “religiously unaffiliated” skyrocketed from 14 percent to 31 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Another fast-growing group in the US, Asian Americans, is experiencing its own faith struggles. While the “Rise of the Nones” cuts across ethnicities, Asian Americans are 7 percent more likely to be “religiously unaffiliated” than the general population.<sup>7</sup>

Across cultures, a major turning point for young people’s faith seems to be high school graduation. Multiple studies highlight that 40 to 50 percent of youth group seniors—like the young people in your church—drift from God and the faith community after they graduate from high school.<sup>8</sup>

**YOUNG ADULTS AGES 18-29 AS A PERCENTAGE OF OVERALL POPULATION**



*“Right now, in this season, we have a youth group that is very centered on going outside of our doors. These students are taking our congregation back to the type of service in our community that helped our church get started. They are breathing fresh air into our church and lighting our passion again. They are modeling for older generations what it means to be a light and glorify God.” —Colette,<sup>9</sup> age 27*

Let’s make that statistic a bit more personal. Visualize a photograph of the young people in your congregation. Now imagine holding a red pen and drawing an X through almost 50 percent of their faces. That many will fall away from the faith as young adults.<sup>10</sup>

Some—perhaps more than half—of those who drift from the church end up rejoining the faith community, generally when they get married and have children.<sup>11</sup> But that leaves close to 50 percent still adrift. Even those who return have made significant life decisions about worldview, relationships, and vocation—all during an era when their faith was shoved aside. The consequences of those lasting decisions are often tough to erase.

As followers of Jesus, parents, and leaders who have been in student and pastoral ministry much of our adult lives, we aren’t satisfied with the shrinking and aging of congregations. We bet you aren’t either.

## **From Bare Spots to “Bright Spots”**

Thankfully, the news for the church is not all gloom and doom. Despite the cloudy sky, light is breaking through here and there. Our team calls these “bright spots.”<sup>12</sup>

All around the country, these hundreds of “bright spot” congregations are effectively loving and serving young people. Some

of them quietly and without flash. Others with great magnetism and fanfare. We call these churches that *grow young* because

1. they are engaging young people ages 15 to 29; and
2. they are growing—spiritually, emotionally, missionally, and sometimes also numerically.

Thanks to these remarkable congregations, tens of thousands of young people can't stop talking about how "known" they feel in their church and how, no matter what happens, their church feels like "home."

Like the 1,000-member Presbyterian church on the East Coast that developed a long-term high school ministry team that pours into volunteer adult leaders, who in turn build a web of support around students.

Or the 100-member midwestern rural Reformed church that has become so hospitable to teenagers and young adults that being at church is now the highlight of their week.

Or the 1,500-member urban multiethnic congregation in the South that was so passionate about investing in young people's growth that it launched not one but *two* leadership training programs for young adults in its city.

Or the 5,000-member nondenominational church that responds to young people's core questions and struggles with an authentic journey of faith rooted in the grand narrative of the gospel rather than pat answers.

Or the 200-member urban Baptist Latino congregation that chose to integrate English into its worship services because it places such a high priority on young people. This church is literally learning a new language in order to grow young.

Four years ago, we launched an investigation into what these sorts of innovative churches are doing right. We conducted this research because we wanted to give you access to what's actually

working. This book describes what we found. It spells out the *core commitments* of churches that are not aging or shrinking but growing young.

The data detailing the decline and “graying” of congregations is convincing, but it’s *not the full story*.

And it doesn’t have to be your story.

### **It Might Feel like the Sky Is Falling, but There Is Hope**

One of the teenagers in our study, Isabella, was changed because 50 years ago, her church decided to live a new story. In the 1960s, this southern church was on the brink of shutting its doors. But instead of going dormant, the congregation resolved to grow young. The church recruited Roger, a new senior pastor who valued young people and their families. Roger emphasized safe and appealing facilities for children and also hired staff specifically devoted to children, teenagers, and their parents. Under Roger’s leadership, the church involved children, senior adults, and everyone in between in local and global intergenerational mission trips. The congregation worked together to help young people feel included and represented across all departments of the church. It was hard work, but eventually that effort led to growth, as well as a long-term commitment to prioritize young people.

Fast-forward to 2014. Isabella, a high school sophomore, found she had no place to go. Kicked out of her house by her drug-addicted mom, Isabella ended up wandering the streets of her town, looking for someplace safe to spend the night.

Desperate, Isabella remembered Dale and Kathy, a couple who had already welcomed a homeless classmate of Isabella, named Emily, into their home. Isabella didn’t know that Dale and Kathy followed Christ. Or that the couple was part of this

church with a 50-year legacy of living out Scripture's mandate to care for all young people, including orphans.

All Isabella knew was that Dale and Kathy had already said yes to Emily. If she was lucky, they would accept Isabella also.

Dale and Kathy were overwhelmed with Emily. Self-employed and strapped financially, they felt stretched thin in every way. But they knew Isabella needed a family and had a strong hunch they could be family for her.

It wasn't all sweetness and light. Far from it. Isabella could be moody, angry, and downright mean. Dale and Kathy knew this was normal teenage rebellion on steroids thanks to Isabella's turbulent childhood. They were committed to loving her unconditionally, but the slammed doors and sulking didn't make it easy.

Isabella certainly wasn't excited about attending the church's worship services with her new family. Hank, the youth pastor, recalled that on Isabella's first Sunday morning in youth group, she was a "pretty dark thundercloud." Seeing Isabella standing in the back, one of the youth leaders, Tori, approached and started a conversation. Or rather, *tried* to start a conversation. Isabella responded to her questions with the shortest answers possible. (If you've ever tried to talk to a surly teenager, you know what we mean.)

At the end of that morning, Tori told Isabella, "I hope you come back next week."

Arms crossed, Isabella mumbled, "I probably will. Because my new parents will make me."

Isabella's grumpiness would have been too much for many leaders, but not Tori. Every week that Isabella was forced to come to church with Dale and Kathy, Tori tried to start a conversation. Eventually, Isabella's responses went from a few words to a few sentences. And then a few stories.

Isabella loved to play guitar, so Tori invited her to join the youth ministry's worship team. Since Dale, Isabella's adoptive dad, was also a musician, he and Isabella would practice together in the evenings at home. Despite their financial challenges, Dale would take time off work to watch Isabella rehearse and play at church.

A few months later during a youth group retreat, Isabella pulled Tori aside and confessed, "I feel dirty. And like something is missing in my life." Isabella shared more with Tori about her sexual promiscuity, as well as how she had been cutting herself to try to relieve some of her pain.

Wide-eyed, Tori responded, "Well, would you like to trust Christ and experience his love?"

Isabella broke down in tears. "That's all I want." After months of being loved by a new family and church that didn't abandon her, Isabella decided she was ready to follow Jesus.

According to Hank, "Isabella went from being a dark, scowling thundercloud to telling everyone she couldn't stop smiling."

Isabella remembers that her friends at school noticed (and were a bit "weirded out") by the "new me." She stopped cutting and developed healthier relationships with guys. When our team visited this church and met Isabella, she told us with tears in her eyes, "One of the families here took me in and adopted me. You *have* to understand how loving this church is. This church has changed my life."

Seventeen-year-old Isabella was changed by *Roger*, the senior pastor she never met but who God used to change the trajectory of the church 50 years ago, which eventually inspired . . .

*Dale and Kathy*, two "regular" church members who realized they couldn't turn away a young person who needed love and a safe place, a decision that connected Isabella to . . .

*Hank and Tori*, two church leaders who didn't give up on Isabella and helped her experience the embrace of a loving God who doesn't give up on anyone.

## **If You Care about Young People, This Book Is for You**

Isabella was changed because of a team of adults—adults who played different roles in her life and her church. Just as young people need a team of adults, in no “bright spot” church did we find one person who was the sole spark that helped the congregation grow young.

Growing young takes everyone. Always.

*Senior pastors*, you are almost always the most vocal and visible spokesperson for your congregation's vision. If your church is on a rafting expedition, usually you are the raft guide; typically, no one influences the direction and progress of your church more than you.

We realize you juggle many tasks and priorities. Too many to count. All of them important. You barely have time to read this book, let alone spend the additional time to put its principles into action.

Our research revealed that growing young can energize your entire congregation. As you navigate the waters of growing young, your other priorities (like effective evangelism, dynamic worship services, powerful service and missions, and authentic community) will gain momentum. If your overall hope and prayer is to have a vibrant congregation, there is arguably no better starting place than the contagious passion of teenagers and young adults.

*Associate pastors, executive pastors, family ministry pastors, and youth pastors*, you often steer the raft, providing your senior leadership with navigational information, encouragement, and warnings about rocks ahead. The raft would be lost without you.

As a key member of your church's leadership team, you have dreams for your congregation and ideas for how to make those dreams a reality. But sometimes you may feel like your input and expertise aren't valued. This book can help you determine if your instincts are on track; our research gives you more credibility as you help point your church toward an even more promising future.

*Ministry volunteers, leadership team members, and parents*, you sit in the front of the raft and help guide it to the best possible waters. Without your ownership, dedication, and hard work, the raft would run aground.

Pastors may come and go, but you don't. You love your church, and you want to see it reach its potential. You're willing to work hard and volunteer long hours. You're probably reading this book because you want the time and energy you devote to make the biggest difference possible.

*Teenagers and young adults*, your creativity and authenticity bring lifeblood to the journey. Let's be honest—the whole rafting journey would be downright boring without *you*. More than this, you take up the oars and keep the raft moving forward. Without you, the raft would flip over.

You are remarkable. You are made in God's image and have unique passions, gifts, and talents—all of which are waiting to be unlocked and explored through your local congregation. This book is geared to help you know how to step out of the shadows and play a leading role in your church's present and future.

Regardless of your age or role in your church, *you have a vital role* to play in helping your congregation grow young. Churches today navigate rough waters. Your church needs *you* to pay attention to what we discovered is working in other congregations. Young people need *you* to dream new dreams that affect



this generation and, in the case of Isabella and thousands of others, future generations to come.

## 10 Qualities Your Church Doesn't Need in Order to Grow Young

Whether you're a senior pastor, church staff member, ministry volunteer, parent, teenager, or young adult, if you are like us, you may be hindered by your preconceived image of what it takes to grow young. Odds are good that your picture of a thriving congregation has had branch after branch grafted on to it over time. Most of these branches stem from the experience of one person—either you or another (likely well-known) leader.

Even your images of successful ministry that are rooted in broader research are often several years—or decades—old. At this point, it's hard to tell which branches have the potential to bear fruit and which are dead weight that drain the life from your congregation. Your ministry efforts are left wilting under the heavy burden of too many unrealistic expectations.

*We need to prune the distractions so the only branches remaining are those that help our churches grow young.* Thanks to our research team's surveys, interviews, and site visits with churches across the US, we can cross off these 10 qualities from our list of what churches need to grow young.

1. *A precise size.* Don't buy into the Goldilocks fantasy that some churches are too big, others are too small, and some are "just right." We saw no statistical relationship between church size and effectiveness. Size doesn't matter.
2. *A trendy location or region.* Did our data unearth churches flourishing near bustling urban centers and dynamic college campuses? Sure. But we also uncovered equally robust

- ministry in rural one-stoplight towns and middle-class suburbia. Your location does not have to be a limitation.<sup>13</sup>
3. *An exact age.* We applaud how God is working through new church plants. We love what we learned from churches that are less than five years old. But we learned just as much, and recorded just as much life change, in churches over a century old. When it comes to churches that grow young, there is no age discrimination.
  4. *A popular denomination . . . or lack of denomination.* When we started our study, we wondered if the churches that rose to the top would skew toward particular denominational, or nondenominational, leanings. While it's true that some denominations are shrinking or aging faster than the average, our fear was unfounded. No need to apologize for your tradition or the fact that you are part of a denomination at all. God is working powerfully through churches of all stripes (and plaids too).
  5. *An off-the-charts cool quotient.* Granted, several of the congregations and leaders bubbling to the top of our research have a certain hip factor. But those were in the minority. For young people today, relational warmth is the new cool.
  6. *A big, modern building.* Some of the congregations that are most effective with young people have new, state-of-the-art facilities. But not all. The majority of the effective churches we studied gather in decent, but not spectacular, spaces. Some don't own their facilities and are creatively meeting in local schools, community centers, and living rooms. For teenagers and young adults, feeling at home transcends any building.
  7. *A big budget.* Churches that grow young intentionally invest in young people, and most often that translates into

a financial investment. But not always. Less resourced congregations creatively support young people in other ways, proving that a small budget does not have to mean small impact.

8. A “contemporary” worship service. Our data indicated that while many young people are drawn to “casual and contemporary” worship, others are drawn to “smells and bells” high-church liturgy and everything in between. While the churches we visited were likely to prefer modern worship in some or all of their worship contexts, they didn’t depend on that alone as a magnet to draw young people.
9. A watered-down teaching style. It’s often assumed that we have to whitewash the teachings of Scripture and somehow make them seem less radical in order to appeal to teenagers and young adults. That’s not what we found. For today’s young people, growing young doesn’t mean we talk about Jesus or the cost of following him any less.
10. A hyper-entertaining ministry program. The entertainment options available to young people in our culture are endless. We don’t have to compete. If we try, we will almost certainly lose. Our research highlighted that faith communities offer something different. Slick is no guarantee of success.

## The Vision That Fueled Our Research

The spark that ignites both our research team’s passion for growing young and our research engine is our mission. The mission of the Fuller Youth Institute, which is embedded in Fuller Theological Seminary, is to equip young people with the faith they need. To accomplish this goal, we *leverage the*

For more on the mission, strategy, and resources of the Fuller Youth Institute, please visit [FullerYouthInstitute.org](http://FullerYouthInstitute.org). For resources for leaders and families on Sticky Faith, see [StickyFaith.org](http://StickyFaith.org). For the research methods and procedures used in the study that fueled this book, see the appendix and [ChurchesGrowingYoung.org](http://ChurchesGrowingYoung.org), where you can also access a free church assessment tool to help your church identify next steps beyond the book.

*best research* that Fuller and others are conducting *into practical resources*. Through all of this, we hope to change how the world sees young people.

Since 2004, we have had the unbelievable honor of dreaming with leaders and parents about how teenagers can develop a lifelong relationship with Jesus, or what we call Sticky Faith. We studied over 500 youth group graduates during their first three years in college, as well as 50 families who are particularly effective at building long-term faith. From that and other data, we've been able to share our Sticky Faith findings and implications with hundreds of thousands of leaders, parents, and grandparents.

During a rare lull in the 12 years that we have pioneered Sticky Faith research and writing, our team started praying about new ministry frontiers. One morning as I (Kara) was praying and journaling about our future, I wrote this phrase: “Sticky Faith studied young people themselves. Now we need to study congregations that are really good at reaching young people.”

That fairly vague phrase penned on a yellow tablet on the navy blue couch in my living room evolved into a four-year interdenominational research effort called the Churches Engaging Young People (or CEYP, pronounced “keep”) Project. Funded by four amazing foundations, this initiative had the

goal of understanding how and why exemplary churches are effectively engaging 15- to 29-year-olds. Our dream is that what we learned from these highly effective congregations will help congregations nationwide advance into new territory.

## Why We Studied 15- to 29-Year-Olds

The majority of the Fuller Youth Institute’s prior research focused on teenagers. Given the lengthening of adolescence we will further describe in chapter 3, we believed it was important to zoom out beyond teenagers to include the malleable stage of early adulthood commonly referred to as “emerging adulthood.”<sup>14</sup>

While there is ongoing debate in the academic and ministry communities about terms and respective age divisions, in this book we opt for the following phrases:

*Teenagers* or *adolescents* refers to 15- to 18-year-olds.<sup>15</sup>

*Emerging adults* or *young adults* indicates 19- to 29-year-olds.

A term we won’t use as often for the specific subset of emerging adults who are 19 to 23 years old is *college students* or *college-age young adults*.

*Young people* is an umbrella term that includes everyone from ages 15 to 29.

The lengthening of adolescence is shown in the delayed timing of five traditional demographic markers of adulthood (leaving home, finishing school, getting married, having a child, and becoming financially independent). In 1960, 66 percent of American men and 77 percent of American women had completed all five of these milestones by age 30. In 2010, only 28 percent of men and 39 percent of women had done so at age 30.<sup>16</sup>

We realize that the wonderfully diverse churches in our study, as well as the equally wonderfully diverse readers of this book, use different terminology in describing their faith communities. Some of you are devoted to your “church,” while others of you are committed to your “parish.” Many of your congregations are led by “pastors,” but others are led by “reverends,” “rectors,” or “priests.” As much as possible, during our research project and in this book, we used language that is broadly common across Christian traditions. Please read between the lines and adjust to whatever leadership and community language best fits you.

## How We Selected Leading Churches

Working largely through Fuller Seminary’s vast network, we solicited names of vibrant congregations from over 35 nominators who fell into three categories:

*National denominational leaders* from 13 Protestant denominations<sup>17</sup> as well as the Roman Catholic Church and Greek Orthodox Church.

*Respected scholars* from seven educational institutions: Fuller Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, Wheaton College, North Park University, Gordon College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Luther Seminary.

*Other experts in ministry to young people outside of specific denominational channels*, including the Willow Creek Association, Orange, the Youth Cartel, Catalyst, and our own Fuller Youth Institute team.<sup>18</sup>

We asked these nominators to identify congregations that have ministries with young people that are numerically growing, are engaging a large number of young people relative to the size of their congregation, or have something “exciting or missional” going on with young people. Using this list of criteria, nominators identified a total of 363 congregations.

## Our Research Journey

We divided our research journey into three stages, each of which used the previous stage as a springboard to dive progressively deeper.

*Stage 1* consisted of two steps, the first of which was completing a thorough review of over 80 books and articles containing academic research and popular writing about both young people and church health. The second step was an extensive online survey about church demographics and ministry qualities completed by the senior leader and youth/young adult director at 259 of the 363 congregations.

Working from that evaluation, we chose 41 of the most noteworthy churches to participate in *Stage 2* interviews.<sup>19</sup> Almost always by telephone, our research team conducted one-hour interviews with a total of 535 young people, parents, church staff, and volunteers across these congregations, yielding nearly 10,000 pages of interview transcripts.

Given overall themes and individual churches' responses to Stage 2, in *Stage 3*, we sent teams of two or three researchers to visit 12 of the 41 congregations. By spending a handful of days at each congregation, we were able to experience both their congregational worship services and their age-specific ministries, as well as conduct in-person interviews and focus

*"Younger folks like me tend to prefer different worship styles than previous generations. In our church, those of us in our twenties are introducing new worship styles that are stretching for more traditional folks. But by worshipping in the same space as older folks, we've come to appreciate what they love about worship. I think my church is realizing that for a 140-year-old church to keep going, younger folks need to feel included." —Cody, age 25*

## If it's God who causes all growth to happen, why do research at all?

As committed as we are to translating research into practical resources, we are even more committed to seeking God for vision, wisdom, and strength. One of my (Kara's) favorite Scripture passages is John 15:4: "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." I have tried to make this passage a core tenet of my life and ministry, so much so that my husband, Dave, and I included it in our wedding ceremony.

But just as the Spirit inspires you and me through times of prayer, Scripture study, and journaling, the Spirit also teaches us through others. The wise comments of a friend over coffee or the vivid insights from a speaker at a conference can alter our lives and ministry trajectories. Instead of asking you to devote years of your life to listen to the stories of over 250 churches, we have done it for you.

So while Scripture doesn't change, the world around us does. Research like ours helps make sense of our changing world.

As much as we love research, we need to be clear: there is no formula for growing young. Our research shows correlations, not causation. The more the congregations we studied *tended to* demonstrate six core commitments, the more they *tended to* effectively engage teenagers and emerging adults. But just as the Spirit empowers us each to grow individually, it's ultimately the Spirit who empowers churches to grow young.<sup>20</sup>

groups with young people, parents, volunteers, congregational members, and leadership staff.

In all, these three stages of research totaled over 10,000 hours of research personnel time and involved interviews or surveys with 474 young people and 799 adults.



## The Diversity of Churches Growing Young

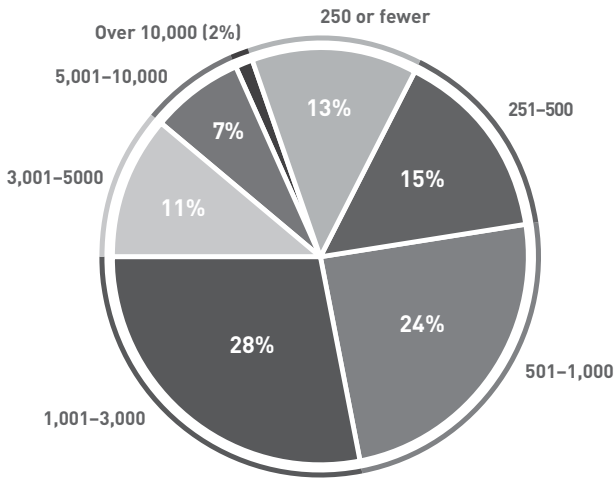
Wondering if any of these churches are similar to yours?

Almost certainly.

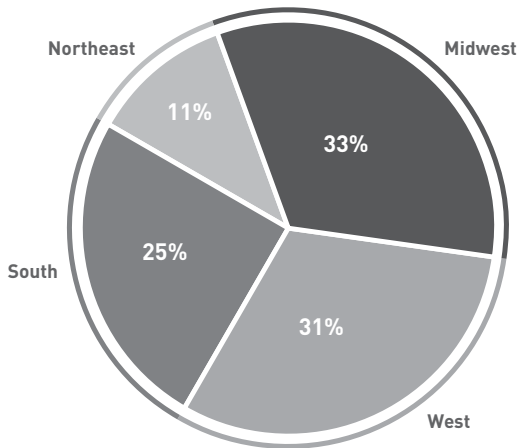
Since the launch of the project, we have been pleased by the rich diversity of churches that graciously accepted our invitation, responded to online surveys, answered questions by phone, and opened their doors (literally!) to us. Here's a snapshot of how the 259 churches that chose to participate in Stage 1 describe themselves.

| <b>Church body/denominational affiliation</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|-------------------|
| No denominational affiliation                 | 17%               |
| Presbyterian                                  | 12%               |
| Baptist                                       | 12%               |
| United Methodist                              | 10%               |
| Evangelical Covenant                          | 7%                |
| Roman Catholic                                | 6%                |
| Reformed or Christian Reformed                | 4%                |
| Nazarene                                      | 4%                |
| Anglican or Episcopal                         | 4%                |
| Assemblies of God or Pentecostal              | 4%                |
| Christian & Missionary Alliance               | 4%                |
| Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod                | 3%                |
| Evangelical Lutheran                          | 3%                |
| Church of Christ or Disciples of Christ       | 3%                |
| Church of God in Christ                       | 2%                |
| Greek Orthodox                                | 2%                |
| Other   | 3%                |

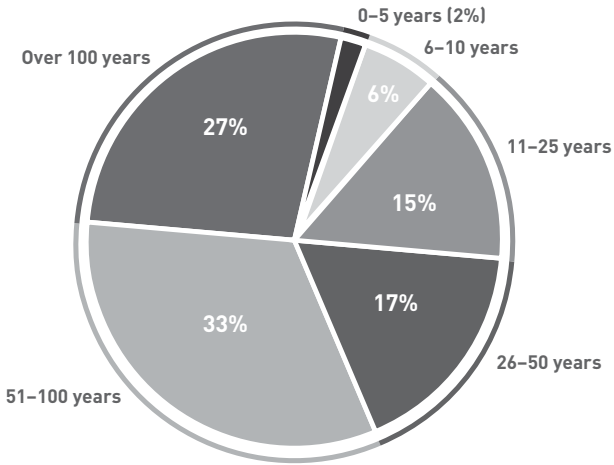
CONGREGATIONAL SIZE<sup>21</sup>



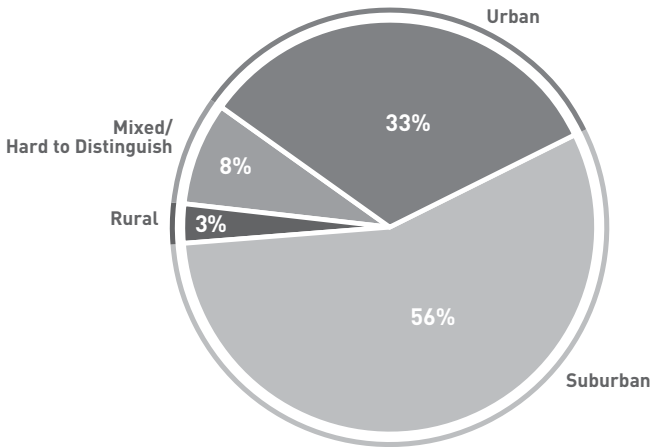
REGION OF THE US  
IN WHICH CONGREGATION IS LOCATED



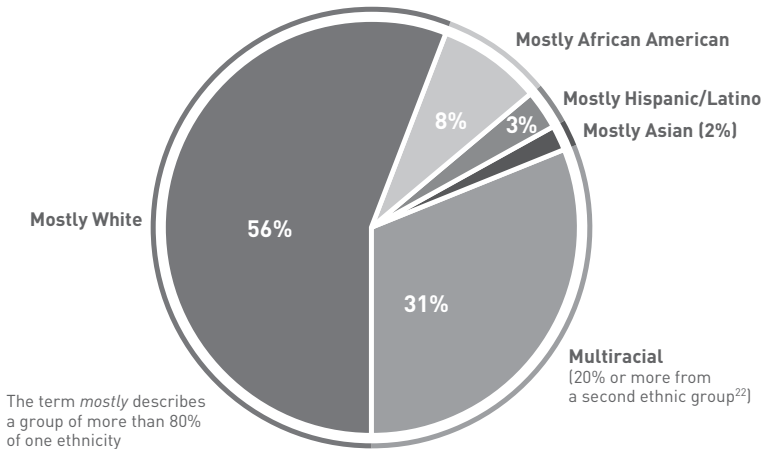
### AGE OF CONGREGATION



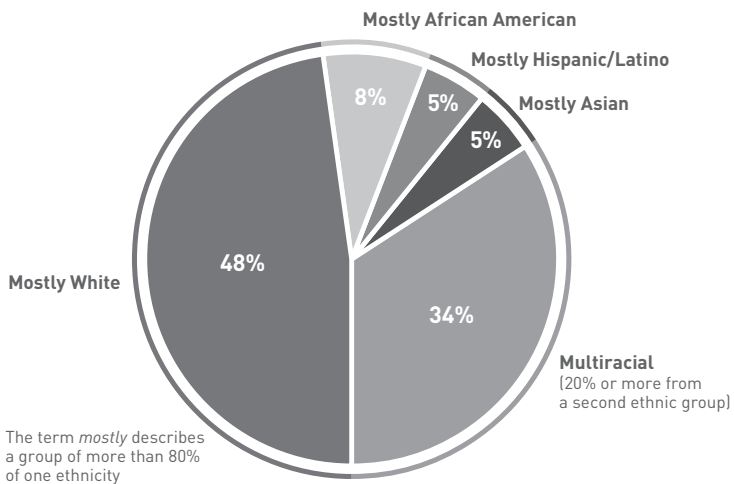
### TYPE OF COMMUNITY IN WHICH CONGREGATION IS LOCATED



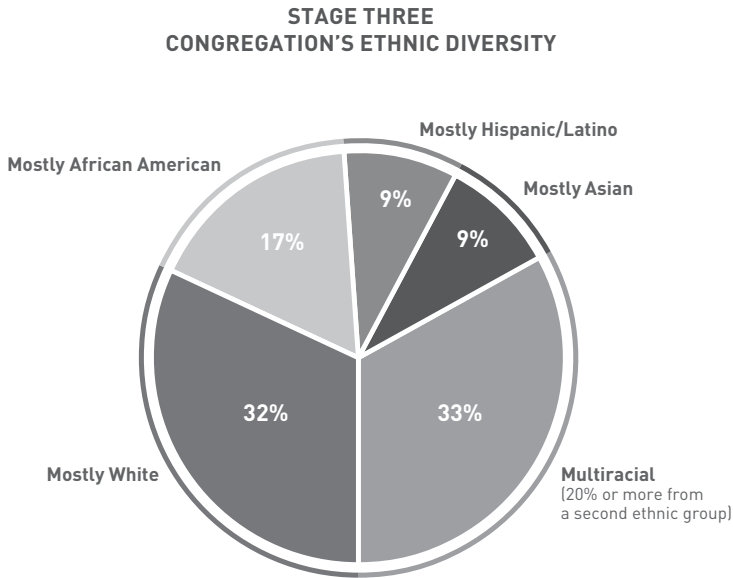
### STAGE ONE CONGREGATION'S ETHNIC DIVERSITY



### STAGE TWO CONGREGATION'S ETHNIC DIVERSITY



While we were unsatisfied with the representation of predominantly Hispanic and Asian congregations in Stage 1, ethnic diversity increased in churches included in Stages 2 and 3.<sup>23</sup>



The term *mostly* describes a group of more than 80% of one ethnicity

## Our Advisors

At the Fuller Youth Institute, our aim is that everything is done through partnerships. This four-year project has been no exception. In fact, it's been our most stellar example in our 12-year history. Like a good church potluck, everyone involved brought their best fare to the table.

Four key Fuller faculty members (Chap Clark, Scott Cormode, Jim Furrow, and Cameron Lee) served as our senior research advisors, bringing research validity and reliability throughout all

Our partners were crucial in helping us define a handful of terms we will use throughout this book, such as:

*Effectively engaging young people*, which we conceive as “churches that are involving and retaining young people in the congregational community, as well as helping them develop a vibrant faith in Jesus.”

*Faith vibrancy and maturity*, which we define through both individual and corporate practices commonly held as markers of faith development.<sup>24</sup>

For those of you craving more details about our research terms and methods, please see the appendix and [ChurchesGrowingYoung.org](http://ChurchesGrowingYoung.org).

three stages of the project. At various points, we consulted with an additional 21 Fuller faculty members whose various fields of scholarship flavored our research design. (We know, you’re wondering, “How many PhDs does it take to do a four-year research project on congregations today?” Apparently the answer is, “Quite a few!”)

Sixteen additional researchers and nationally recognized thought leaders in youth ministry and church leadership shared their collective wisdom by joining our Expert Advisory Council. By meeting in person for a three-day summit, as well as providing regular input by phone and email, this team made sure we were asking the most pressing questions and following the right recipe to get the best possible answers.

In order to translate our research into practical resources that are valuable to congregations of all shapes and sizes, we also formed a 10-member Pastor Advisory Council. These senior leaders teamed with us in the latter stages of the project to help ensure that this book and our additional writing, training, and online tools meet the needs of churches thirsty to grow young.

We are grateful to each of our world-class Expert Advisory Council members for the hours and hours they spent reviewing our survey drafts and interview questions, as well as processing our findings and dreaming with us about implications.

Steve Argue, Fuller Theological Seminary

Andy Crouch, Christianity Today

Kenda Creasy Dean, Princeton Seminary

Mark DeVries, Ministry Architects

Reggie Joiner, Orange and reThink Group

Pamela King, Fuller Theological Seminary

David Kinnaman, Barna Group

Terry Linhart, Bethel College

Brad Lomenick, BLINC

Bob McCarty, National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry

Amy McEntee, National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association

Soong-Chan Rah, North Park Theological Seminary

Dave Rahn, Youth for Christ

Tyler Reagin, Catalyst

Andy Root, Luther Seminary

Virginia Ward, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

## **Why Bother? What Young People Can Add to Your Congregation**

In the midst of reading about our exhaustive research process, you might wonder whether it's worth all this effort to help

your congregation grow young. They don't tithe much. They can be a bit flaky. They prefer different—and way louder—music.

Teenagers and emerging adults, we know that you have concerns about your church too.

When we started our research, we wondered if growing young was worth the effort. So in every stage, we explored the specific contributions that young people like Isabella make to churches and parishes that have successfully grown young. The term we heard more than any other was “vitality.” Young people infuse congregations with energy and intensity. As we peeled back the layers to further understand how young people contribute, we realized they add *more* to congregations.

Each member of our Pastor Advisory Council helped design the right menu of resources for adults and congregations needing answers.

Eugene Cho, Quest Church, Q Cafe, One Day's Wages, WA

Sergio De La Mora, Cornerstone Church, CA

Erwin Raphael McManus, Mosaic, CA

Brenda Salter McNeil, Quest Church and Seattle Pacific University, WA

Carey Nieuwhof, Connexus Church, Ontario, Canada

Perry Noble, NewSpring Church, SC

John Ortberg, Menlo Church, CA

Efrem Smith, World Impact, CA

Jill VerSteege, Reformed Church in America, MI

Len Wenke, Holy Family Church, Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati, OH



*“A few weeks ago, I met a woman who is new to our church. She started coming because her son started to attend our youth group. Because of how much he’s loved the youth ministry, she is now an active member of our church. Her journey to join our faith community started with her 16-year-old son.” —Maggie, parent*

*More service.* The most dominant theme in the descriptions of what young people add is that they help congregations accomplish their mission. Church leaders are quick to value how young people serve in their worship services, as well as outreach and discipleship ministries. But leaders are not myopic in their appreciation of young people’s service; they are just as likely to appreciate young people’s service inside the church as their service outside the church through community-based and global organizations.

*More passion.* When adults describe how young people improve the tenor of the overall congregation, the quality they emphasize more than any other is that young people add passion. They pour themselves wholeheartedly into what they do, which energizes those around them and increases what’s possible.

*More innovation.* The fresh spin young people bring to life and ministry is often appreciated by leaders whose entire congregations have been infiltrated by the creativity all too often bottled up in youth ministry. Churches willing to twist off the cap release innovative energy that can transform their communities.

*More money.* When we asked leaders at churches growing young how teenagers and young adults contribute financially to their church, they generally chuckled and responded, “Not much.” But usually those same leaders quickly added that

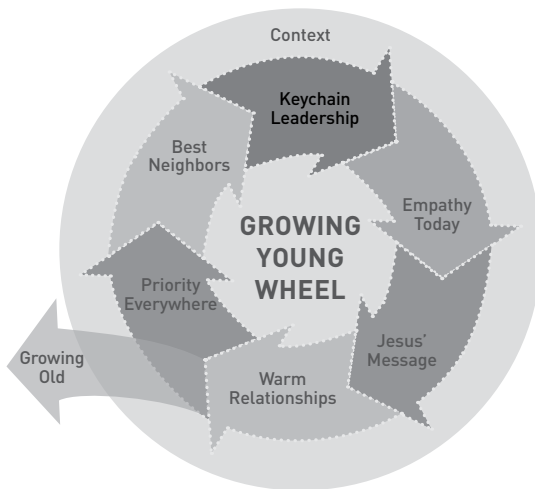
young people's energy attracts older adults with more financial resources, who in turn generously support the ministries of their church. Plus, eventually those young people gain more vocational stability and can become part of their church's financial backbone.

*More overall health.* As we discussed our findings with our advisors, many commented that young people seem to be a barometer of the overall health of a church. According to FYI advisor and lead pastor Erwin Raphael McManus, "Healthy churches reach young people, and young people make churches healthier. If your church is reaching 20-year-olds, your church will reach 60-year-olds."<sup>25</sup> John Ortberg, also a research advisor and senior pastor, added, "You can't build a great church with a bad student ministry, and you can't build a great student ministry with a languishing church." For those wondering if churches that grow young inevitably reach other generations less effectively, the answer is an emphatic no. In a kingdom win/win, stronger ministry to young people bulks up the ministry muscles of the entire congregation, and vice versa.

## **The Six Core Commitments Your Church Needs to Grow Young**

Our deep and wide analysis of some of our nation's most innovative churches unearthed a Growing Young Wheel and six core commitments. While there is no guarantee that enacting these six commitments in your congregation will produce better engagement with young people like Isabella, they are the most universal commitments in churches with the greatest proven effectiveness. The rest of this book fleshes out each commitment in detail.

1. *Unlock keychain leadership.* Instead of centralizing authority, empower others—especially young people.
2. *Empathize with today's young people.* Instead of judging or criticizing, step into the shoes of this generation.
3. *Take Jesus' message seriously.* Instead of asserting formulaic gospel claims, welcome young people into a Jesus-centered way of life.
4. *Fuel a warm community.* Instead of focusing on cool worship or programs, aim for warm peer and intergenerational friendships.
5. *Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere.* Instead of giving lip service to how much young people matter, look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource, and involve them in all facets of your congregation.
6. *Be the best neighbors.* Instead of condemning the world outside your walls, enable young people to neighbor well locally and globally.



## The Ground Rules of Growing Young

Having studied congregations like yours, we identified a handful of ground rules that guide these six core commitments and we hope will guide your church.

*The order is flexible.* The Growing Young Wheel follows the chronological sequence we saw most commonly. In other words, more congregations start growing young by beginning with keychain leadership than any other core commitment. But some congregations inaugurate the process through other portals (most notably, through warm community and prioritizing young people). Like a child building a Lego masterpiece, your congregation might unsnap a few of these core commitments, arrange them in a different order, and try again.

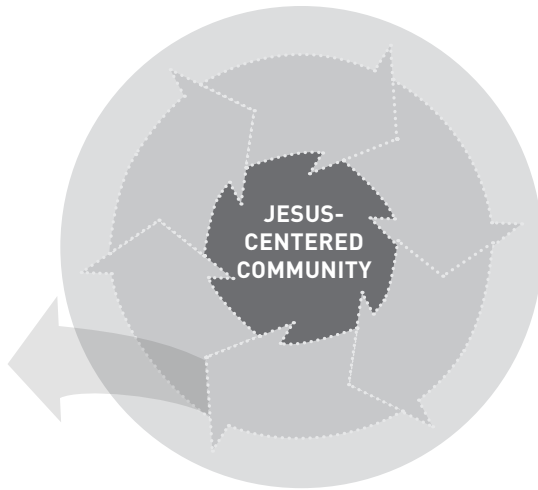
*The boundaries are permeable.* The distinction among the core commitments isn't always clean. Dotted lines separate them because they often (beautifully) bleed into each other, infecting each other with new priorities and practices.

*The turning point is priority.* A large swath of our nation's congregations can, and do, foster many of these core commitments. They are filled with lovely people doing lovely ministry. *They just aren't reaching young people.* For many congregations, making the intentional decision to disproportionately prioritize young people (within the context of their families) is the inflection point between growing young and growing old.

*The context is pivotal.* Thanks to our own and others' research, we feel like we know young people. But we don't know *your* young people or the particular dynamics of *your* community. The six core commitments are surrounded by a layer of context because you need to listen and adapt constantly to the teenagers and emerging adults in your family, congregation, and city.

*The pursuit of Jesus is the overriding motivation.* As with other pursuits, a church's passion to grow young is motivated

primarily by members' dedication to walk in the way of Jesus and invite young people to join them. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are what distinguish congregations from community centers or country clubs. Imagine the Growing Young Wheel as a set of commitments orbiting the core of Jesus-centered communities.



### Findings and Ideas: A Dynamic Duo

As much as we applaud the data that helped us develop this Growing Young Wheel and six commitments, we cheer even more enthusiastically when that data is translated into practical ideas. We believe it is the application of research that helps you develop a unique strategy that fits your distinct vision and philosophy.

In the first sections of most chapters, you will get a front-row seat to a powerful story of these core commitments lived out in churches we studied, as well as *research findings* that help you embody them. While the bulk of the data stems from our

research, it would be both naïve and arrogant for us to assume that our work is the only—or most important—research on the faith development of teenagers and emerging adults.<sup>26</sup> So we also draw from leading theologians and researchers—hopefully making this book a “one-stop shop” for your toughest questions about both your church and young people.

In the *ideas for action* section of each chapter, ideas from congregations we studied will take the field. Since no two towns, congregations, or leadership teams are identical, it’s impossible for us to give you a foolproof, step-by-step blueprint to build a church that grows young. These examples from inspiring congregations, along with a handful of *strategic questions* that conclude each chapter, are like scaffolding. Whether you’re a senior pastor, associate pastor, ministry volunteer, parent, or young person, our hope is that you and others reading along with you can use these ideas and questions to build a plan tailored to your unique church.

As we showcase over 250 amazing congregations in this book, we are concerned that you might end up feeling worse about the current state of your congregation. *Please don’t compare the best of what we share about these churches with the worst of what you know about your own.* Instead of comparing yourself to others, please remember that *growing young means starting where you are.* For all of these churches, it’s been a multiyear (and sometimes multidecade) process involving a complicated interplay of forward momentum and setbacks of all sizes. While we’ve chosen to focus on what’s positive and hopeful about these churches, so many leaders we interviewed wanted to make sure we heard the negative, including their pain and struggle. We could have written several books on their trials and challenges alone. So we don’t want you to feel discouraged about the gap between where you are and where you hope to be. When you

take three steps forward and then fall two steps back, celebrate that at least you're one step closer to your goals.

## Growing Young Can Change More Than Just *Your* Church

Throughout our research, we kept you and your church in mind.

But we also had a bigger dream in mind. *Growing young can change more than just your church.* We love the church. So much so that we are convinced that the best way to change a society, or even the world, is through congregations dedicated to living out Jesus' commands to love God and love others. (If you also believe in the church, we know you're nodding along with us.)

We believe that congregations stand the greatest chance of living out these commands when they are ignited by passionate young people.

As the nearest middle schooler will remind you, if  $A = B$  and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ . In other words, if we transform a country by transforming our churches, and if we transform our churches by transforming our work with young people, then transforming our work with young people can transform our society and even our world.

In remarkable churches nationwide, this vision to change congregations, communities, and our culture is a reality. It could be your reality too.

## Chapter Highlights

- Shrinking and aging are the default for the vast majority of denominations and congregations in the US today.
- In order to understand what's working in churches that grow young, we launched a four-year project examining over 250 churches and parishes that are especially effective

with 15- to 29-year-olds. Our hope is that studying these “bright spots” will catapult other congregations forward into more innovative ministry.

- Whether you’re a church with bare spots because you are missing young people or a congregation that’s thriving and wants to stay on that trajectory, we must all prune away our preconceptions of what churches need in order to grow young. Our research unearthed a treasure of compelling ministry happening in congregations of all sizes, denominations, locations, buildings, and budgets. The good news is that according to our data, any congregation can grow young.
- Based on our research, we believe congregations are most likely to grow young when they embrace the six core commitments in the Growing Young Wheel:
  - Unlock keychain leadership.
  - Empathize with today’s young people.
  - Take Jesus’ message seriously.
  - Fuel a warm community.
  - Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere.
  - Be the best neighbors.
- Young people add great vitality to their faith communities by increasing their churches’ service, passion, innovation, financial resources, and overall health.

## Strategic Questions to Help You Grow Young

1. What motivates you to read a book geared to help churches grow young?



2. How, if at all, have you seen signs of aging or shrinking in your congregation or other congregations?
  
3. Which of the 10 things your church doesn't need in order to grow young on pages 25–27 have you tended to believe?
  
4. Based on your first look at the six core commitments briefly described on page 43, which are most prevalent in your congregation? Which are missing?
  
5. How have young people added vitality to your life and congregation?
  
6. Who else needs to join you on your journey to help your congregation grow young? What dialogue partner, small group, or team in your church can help you with your discoveries and dreams?

Not all young people  
leave church.



Find out how our nation's leading churches are engaging  
the next generation.

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