



How to Support YOUNG ADULT LEADERSHIP

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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"I believe in this church and that is why I am here."¹

We often hear that young adults are leaving the church, and some are, but what about those that remain? Why do they stay? What are they looking or hoping for?

In May 2018, fourteen young adults, aged 18–28, attended a consultation at the national office to discuss mission and ministry. Although the participants had differing perspectives on many issues, they had one important thing in common: **they care about The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and they want to be a part of it.**

The participants in the consultation repeatedly, emphatically and uniformly voiced that they wanted to be and should be fully, effectively and actively involved in the life of the church. Involvement of young adults in church life means ministering *with* them by honouring the value of their gifts and perspectives, and sharing opportunities to lead, network, connect, learn and serve. The following suggestions for how congregations can support young adults to fully participate in the life of church are based on the results of the consultation.

MINISTRY WITH YOUNG ADULTS

"We are not just the future of the church; we are the present."

Young Adults are known for their flexibility, love of innovation, collaborative work ethic, strong cultural intelligence and desire to make a meaningful difference in the world. Programs and events that minister to young adults rather than *with* young adults often miss out on the opportunities that could be gained from genuine collaboration. The participants in the consultation emphasized that churches need to invite young adults into leadership and planning roles in *all* aspects of ministry and mission, but especially those aimed at their age group.

- Let go of expectations on how young adults *should* engage in the congregation and church. Instead, *ask* how they *would like* to be involved.
- Affirm the gifts you see in young adults and invite them to explore them further in the context of ministry (e.g., "I've noticed your kindness with others. Would you be interested in accompanying a few of us on Saturday when we visit homebound seniors?").
- Be open to having young adults try different ministry opportunities offered through your congregation before committing to one.

¹ The quotes are the words of young adults in The Presbyterian Church in Canada that were either written or spoken during the consultation in May 2018. The consultation organizers decided to keep quotes anonymous so that participants would feel comfortable speaking honestly.

DEEP, RICH AND THOUGHTFUL THEOLOGY

“Intelligent theology and doctrine that is really thoughtful and well-informed takes historical context into account—that’s one of the things that keeps me in the church. [I appreciate that] we are so rooted in intelligent theology.”

Many young adults in the consultation expressed an appreciation for the depth and richness of the theology expressed in Presbyterian churches. They want to be part of churches that challenge them to look at the world through a gospel lens and think about how they can best serve creation and their neighbours. They want faith communities that allow them to question and express doubts while helping them learn to live out their faith in their own unique contexts.

- Create a culture of theological reflection that welcomes questions and invites engagement. For example, by hosting a series of conversations on issues of faith.
- Seek out local lectures or events that young adults can attend or organize series of small group sessions on online videos and lectures by Christian speakers.
- Regularly post interesting Christian articles, videos, blog posts or podcast episodes on your congregation’s social media pages to encourage theological reflection.

SHARED LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING

“Young adults shouldn’t just be in an advisory role—they should have the power to make decisions.”

Many young adults in the consultation participate regularly in their congregations; however, they indicated that their participation is often limited to opportunities that do not allow them to shape the church in any significant way. If they are invited to participate in the visioning, decision-making and planning for the church, it can sometimes feel as though they are there as a “token” young person, whose voice does not carry as much weight as the others. The participants expressed that, if young adults had “real opportunities for engagement, leadership, and decision-making in all areas of church life,” it would lead to more vibrant congregations and more innovative approaches to mission and ministry.

- Encourage each leader in the congregation to nurture the gifts of young adults and to invite them to be part of their ministry teams as peers and equals.
- Seek out and support young adults to become elders and remove any current barriers that exist to them taking on this role (e.g., session meeting times).
- Recognize and nurture the ideas that young adults bring to the table. Ensure they know that their voices are just as valid as everyone else’s voice. Be willing to step outside of your comfort zone to help them develop and implement their ideas.

PRIORITIZE PARTICIPATION IN GOD’S MISSION

“I hope that the PCC knows how valuable we are and how much young people are wanting and willing to serve in greater capacities than meets the eye. I hope that the church knows how much it’s impacted my life for the better, but also how it has stifled my readiness and willingness to serve as I’ve gotten older.”

The young adults who participated in the consultation expressed passion, energy and drive when speaking about their desire to serve their congregations and the larger church body. One person, excited by the passion with which the group was speaking about being engaged in the church, said, “We have people who don’t just want to do this, but are passionate about doing this.” Young adults are seeking meaningful ways to serve their communities locally and internationally. They are looking for churches where they can not only serve but also reflect on how their service is part of God’s mission.



- Provide opportunities for young adults to connect at a heart-level to mission. This can be done locally through a ministry or outreach of your congregation or internationally through work of International Ministries (presbyterian.ca/im) and PWS&D (presbyterian.ca/pwsd/get-involved).
- Encourage, pray for and provide financial support to young adults engaged in mission.
- Give young adults the opportunity *shape* your church's mission priorities by participating in any visioning, planning or discernment around mission happening in your congregation.

CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF AUTHENTICITY & FLEXIBILITY

"[The church needs] people who genuinely enjoy each other's company and want to be part of each other's lives."

When speaking about what they like about their churches, many young adults in the consultation mentioned authenticity and openness to change. Creating an authentic and flexible church culture is about encouraging warm, honest and mutually respectful relationships between the generations. To develop inter-generational relationships, churches need to be open to changing the way "things have always been done" to welcome the gifts, perspectives and experiences of young adults.

- Be intentional about creating and taking opportunities to have real and meaningful conversations with young adults that demonstrate that you know their names and are interested in hearing about what they are interested in and what they are doing; listen more than talk.
- Host fun events and activities that allow for fellowship between the younger and older generations. For example, a night at the movies with discussion afterwards at a nearby coffee shop.
- Facilitate opportunities for deeper conversations: host an evening of intergenerational faith sharing, pair younger and older adults together as prayer partners, encourage people of different generations to serve in outreach and mission activities together, host a visioning event where people of all ages share their imaginative, creative, out-of-the-box ideas for ministry.

LISTEN AND PROVIDE SUPPORT

"Youth are interested and willing to get involved in all aspects of church activities. Adults should not only give us a voice, but they should be willing to listen as well."

While the passion for engagement in the church is alive and well among the young adults in the consultation, they expressed a strong need for better support from the church. Most young adults are in a transitional stage of life; they may be moving, entering post-secondary education or starting a new job. The stress of this stage can affect the mental and physical health of young adults, thus preventing them from thriving and sharing their God-given gifts. They called for communities of faith to listen to

young adults, understand the challenges facing their generation and work with them to create networks and strategies of support.

- Host intergenerational sharing circles in which people from different generations can listen and learn about each other's experiences of life, faith and the church.
- Reach out with offers of support (e.g., home-cooked meals, care packages or cards, words of encouragement, offers of transportation to congregational events).
- Invite young adults to be paired with an older adult for mutual mentoring—mentoring where both partners share their wisdom and experience to benefit the other.

MAKE YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY A PRIORITY

“Why is there nothing for me at my church after youth group?”

The young adults participating in the consultation highlighted a “gap” in church ministry. While there is an intentional focus in many congregations on children, families and youth, young adult ministry is rarely a priority. Doing ministry with young adults means taking their spiritual needs seriously. Churches need to ensure that they are helping young adults to grow as disciples, which requires intentionally creating opportunities for them to explore their faith.

- Find those with proven gifts and experience championing young adults and ask them to be advocates within your congregation to ensure young adult ministry is a priority.
- Identify young adults with leadership gifts and invite them to design a program that they are excited about. Give them full leeway but also regular coaching with an elder.
- Support young adults to create small groups based on their interests and needs and/or connect young adults with existing intergenerational small groups in your congregation.

TIMING THAT WORKS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

“[We need] regular weekly fellowships for those [who] cannot make Sunday service.”

It is rare for a young adult to have a “9–5” job. Often, young adults are spread thin between various commitments. It was expressed during the consultation that young adults can feel alienated when they are not able to attend regular Sunday service. The inability to regularly attend services can cause young adults to drift away if they don't feel connected or supported by their community. Be sure that there are opportunities for young adults to connect, learn and worship with other members of your faith community outside of Sunday mornings.

- Plan as far in advance as you can for all church events and check in with young adults to ensure the timing works for them. As the date approaches, send friendly reminders.
- Be flexible! Include young adults in church ministries even if their schedules will not allow them to be there as often as other volunteers.
- Host midweek gatherings, such as a theology pub night or a book discussion at a local coffee shop, where young adults (and others) can explore and ask questions about faith.

For more ideas about involving young adults in the mission and ministry at your congregation, contact Canadian Ministries at canadianministres@presbyterian.ca or call 1-800-619-7301.