

## **Strategies for Strengthening Young Adult Ministry: Supporting Bridging Youth**

This guide focuses on how congregations can support and accompany youth (14-20) as they transition into young adulthood (18-35). Attention to bridging can help youth feel valued and seen in this special time of life, and signals to them that they are an important part of our larger UU community. Of children and youth who are raised Unitarian Universalist, it's estimated that less than 15 percent transition to active participation in UU community as adults, or return later to a congregation later in life. Intentional programs and initiatives, such as mentoring, connection with a minister, and events that foster meaningful multigenerational relationships can help youth find their place and stay involved into adulthood.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for young adult ministry, and this guide certainly doesn't have all the answers, but we hope the ideas below help you move toward your goals. Below, you'll find an explanation of common challenges, strategies to try and resources to explore. The "Challenges congregations face" section draws on experiences in Canadian congregations, and real stories from the [Canadian Young Adult Survey](#).

There are many ideas in the "Strategies to try" section, but we recommend choosing one, two, or three actions to work on first, with attention to your current context, needs, and hopes for young adult ministry. Before proceeding, [consult the appendix for a list of factors to consider](#) when choosing an approach, such as your staff/volunteer capacity, the congregation's willingness to support changes, the structure of your congregation, and the number of youth and young adults that currently attend.

Thank you to Ursula Svenne for her insights in helping to put this list together. And thank you to Hazel Gabe and countless other young adults who have stayed involved, and whose struggles, wisdom and gifts have informed this work.

The CUC's [Youth Ministry Resources page](#) has many other resources that can help your congregation enhance youth ministry and better serve bridging youth. We especially recommend the [Guide to Youth Ministry and Intergenerational Connections](#), that outlines ways to foster connections between youth and other parts of the congregation.

### **Challenges congregations face:**

- Youth who are primarily engaged in youth group are well connected with one another but lack connections with others in the congregation. They may not have structured or intentional ways to develop relationships with people of other generations.
- Youth don't participate in Sunday services due to timing, interest, and/or worship preferences. If they don't develop a comfort with typical Sunday morning worship and congregational life, it may be harder for them to participate as young adults.
- Older youth often feel that they will be "falling off a cliff" after youth group, instead of bridging into a new community.

- The congregation or youth group does not provide structured opportunities and rituals to mark bridging from youth to young adulthood.
  - Bridging is an important way for congregants who are not involved with the youth group to get to know bridging youth and accompany them into young adulthood.
- Some bridging youth move away for work, school or travel and become disconnected from UU community for various reasons, including:
  - Lack of a UU congregation in their new location.
  - Life changes, work and school commitments that make it difficult to attend a congregation regularly.
  - Difficulty making a connection to their new UU congregation, and find it hard to adapt to congregational life after youth group.
  - Barriers to attending regional and national events that could keep them connected.
- Congregations aren't aware that UU young adults have moved to their city for school or work, or don't have contact information to reach out.
- Congregations are unsure about how to minister to young adults who are raised UU instead of being new to our faith.

**Strategies to try:**

**A) Fostering intergenerational connections:**

- Start early - build a strong multigenerational community for all ages. If youth feel like important and valued members of the congregation from childhood, they will be more likely to be involved in their teenage years and into young adulthood.
  - Consider having regular multigenerational Sunday services, or ensure that children and youth can participate in some part of the service.
  - If your congregation already has multigen worship, continue to find ways for young people to meaningfully participate.
  - Consult the [Guide to Youth Ministry and Intergenerational Connections](#), a useful resource that outlines ways to foster connections between youth and other parts of the congregation.
- Organize youth meet-ups with the minister, staff or lay leaders. When youth have strong relationships with the minister, they are more likely to feel connected to the congregation and stay involved in young adulthood. Ideas for fostering minister-youth connections:
  - Regular ice cream socials with the minister - ideally monthly or at least a few times a year (Idea from First UU Winnipeg).
  - Discussion with the minister after attending Sunday service as a group - once a month or every other month (Idea from First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto).
  - Minister working with youth to plan an annual youth service - it's important that this be a truly collaborative partnership, with a focus on youth ideas and leadership.
  - Minister attending a youth group meeting, games night, meal, or other social occasion that is led by youth and encourages positive connections.

- Coordinate mentorship between youth and adults.
  - Match each youth with a trusted adult congregant who can build a supportive relationship with youth (similar to Coming of Age programs).
  - Plan mentor-mentee activities for all the pairs a couple of times a year.
  - Encourage meaningful conversations and relationship building, with clear boundaries and safety guidelines in place.
  
- Encourage youth leadership and meaningful involvement in congregational life. Youth have a lot to offer and can take on important roles in a congregation, but they are often relegated to manual labour, childcare and odd jobs that no one else wants to take on. Adult leaders should work with youth to determine how they'd like to be involved. Here are a few ideas:
  - Taking on special roles in Sunday services - getting additional responsibility can become a milestone for new youth.
  - Helping with coffee hour, especially as part of an established team or pod that can foster intergenerational connections.
  - Organizing fundraisers, such as congregational meals, socials, games nights, or opportunities for congregants to get to know youth better.
  - Being involved in children's religious exploration.
  - Serving on the board, worship committee, search committee, social justice and environmental groups, or project-based task forces.
  
- Plan fun multigenerational events that foster connections across the generations.
  - Ideas include games nights, potlucks, murder mystery games, coffee houses, table conversation topics and birthday celebrations.
  - Find ways to build multigenerational connections into existing activities like social justice work, marches, coffee hour, congregational milestones and holidays.
  - Try a spiritual practice together, such as walking a labyrinth or meditation.
  
- Ensure that multigen activities are planned by youth and adults together, and that youth inclusion isn't just an afterthought. It's much easier to be inclusive to all generations when those considerations are central throughout the planning process.
  
- Deep talk and fun are better than small talk! Rather than asking "how's school going?," engage youth in conversations about their passions, spiritual journeys, and deeper life questions. Equip adults to have these conversations - conversation starters and questions can help.

**B) Bridging rituals:**

- If the congregation has youth who are in the 17-19 age range and are leaving youth group, plan a bridging ceremony to mark the transition.
  - If possible, make the bridging ceremony an annual event so it is always on the calendar and youth and their families can plan for it in advance.
  - Although the youth group may also mark bridging in their own way, it's best there is a congregational bridging ritual as part of a Sunday service. This shows youth that their lives and transitions are important to the whole community.

- It's fine to include other types of transitions in the same service, but make sure that youth bridging is given its own time with distinct and special rituals.
- Youth, and especially bridging youth, should absolutely be part of the planning process for any bridging activities, helping determine what is meaningful for them.
- Provide bridging gifts. Many congregations put together a small package of gifts or tokens to mark a youth's transition to young adulthood. This could include:
  - A copy of the book *Becoming*, or another meditation manual.
  - A chalice necklace.
  - Some token that is specific and meaningful to your local congregation.
  - A card or letter signed by congregational leaders, or by the whole congregation.
  - Anything else that might help the bridging youth hold on to their home congregation, while giving comfort for the journey ahead.
- Welcome youth to young adulthood with clear next steps - this could include a young adult group, opportunities for leadership, spiritual growth, and relationship building with other people in the congregation.
  - If membership is an important part of your congregation, extend the invitation to bridging youth to become members. It's helpful if this invite comes from a minister or other leader and includes some information about the importance of membership.
  - Without pressure to do so, invite bridging youth to learn more about pledging financial support to the congregation. There should never be a financial barrier to participating, but even contributing small amounts monthly can be a marker of an emerging adult's independence and their commitment to the congregation.
- Plan a "homecoming dinner" for recently bridged youth. Some congregations hold a dinner and social event each December to welcome back young adults who have moved away but are visiting at Christmas.
  - This is something for bridging youth to look forward to, and can help current youth connect with the young adult community.
  - Ideally, this would be a multigenerational event organized by the congregation.
  - Schedule and plan the event in consultation with youth and returning young adults.

### **C) Support moving into young adulthood:**

- Connect youth with CUC staff: It's always helpful for CUC staff to know the names and contact information for bridging youth, especially if they are moving to a new city. Staff can help connect them with a new congregation and with CUC events and programs that can keep them involved in UU community.
  - Email [young-adults@cuc.ca](mailto:young-adults@cuc.ca).
- Encourage and support bridging youth to attend young adult events. Participating in young adult conferences and gatherings can really help bridging youth get to know the community they are moving into. Many young adult events, like Chorus and the Unicamp Young Adult Retreat, have elements of youth cons and will feel familiar to those coming from youth cons.

- Provide information about upcoming events and opportunities, and encouragement to register (see below for details).
- If possible, the congregation can support a new young adult's attendance by helping with fundraising or providing a registration and travel subsidy.
- Encourage young adults to apply for subsidies through the Dawning Future Subsidy Fund - [more details on the CUC website](#).
- Some bridging youth and emerging young adults may need support and guidance to apply for subsidies, register for events, and plan travel. Without the structure of a youth group and youth advisors, it can be more difficult to get organized for events.
- Opportunities for bridging youth and young adults. You can find more information about each of these events and programs [on the CUC website here](#).
  - [Chorus](#): The annual, national gathering of young adults - on the May long weekend, in a different location each year.
  - [Gathered Here](#): A monthly online gathering and spiritual check in for young adults.
  - [Pastoral Care Team](#): A team of ministers dedicated to providing spiritual care and listening ears to young adults by phone, text and video conference.
- Connecting youth to their future congregation (for youth who are moving). If a bridging youth is moving to a place with a UU congregation, it's helpful if a minister or other leader makes a personal introduction to the minister or staff in their new location.
  - They may choose not to attend their new congregation, but having a personal introduction can make the transition easier. The new minister can also continue reaching out to them to maintain that connection.
  - Please also connect the young adult with CUC staff by emailing [young-adults@cuc.ca](mailto:young-adults@cuc.ca)
  - Here is a map of all the [Unitarian Universalist congregations in Canada](#).
- Send care packages to young adults who have moved away. Receiving a note or gift from their home congregation shows young adults that they're still important to their community.
  - Include things like notes, prayer cards, dried flowers, snacks, readings and art.
  - Even if the care package is just a postcard, it will be gratefully received!

### **Key Resources:**

- Advice from other congregations: contact CUC staff to get connected to congregations who have successful bridging programs and have experience planning bridging ceremonies. Email [youth@cuc.ca](mailto:youth@cuc.ca) or contact your region's Congregational Life Staff.
- [Guide to Youth Ministry and Intergenerational Connections](#): A useful resource that outlines ways to foster connections between youth and other parts of the congregation.
- [Bridging resources from the UUA](#): A list of resources and recommendations for supporting bridging youth through their transition, and continuing to support emerging adults.
- [What If by Hazel Gabe](#): A reflection by Hazel Gabe, a Canadian UU young adult, on the experience of transitioning from youth to young adulthood in our faith tradition.
- [Emerging Adult Ministry: Spheres of Engagement](#): A resource from the UUA that gives tips and guidance about supporting those in the emerging adult age group (18-24).

- [Bridgers Care Package](#): A helpful blog post about maintaining relationships with bridged youth and emerging young adults. Also has good ideas for assembling care packages.
  - [Young adult events through the CUC and UUA](#): A complete list of events and programs available to UU young adults. For upcoming dates, please see the CUC Events Calendar.
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## **Factors to consider in choosing next steps**

- What is your congregation's capacity and structure for supporting these actions?
  - Minister, religious educator and other staff - do any staff have direct responsibility for young adult welcoming and programs?
  - Lay leadership - identify which leaders, groups or committees can contribute to this work or take ownership
- What are your congregation's budget considerations?
  - Is there a youth and young adult program budget to support YA groups or activities?
  - Does welcoming/membership have a budget to support any actions?
  - What staff time and money are available for this work?
  - If additional funding is required, could the congregation fundraise for it?
- How does your congregation's culture affect your chances of success?
  - How open is your congregation to change?
  - Where is there (or might there be) resistance to new ideas and change?
  - How much is your congregation and leadership invested in increasing young adult attendance and participation?
- How sustainable are the proposed actions and initiatives?
  - Who is responsible for carrying this work forward?
  - Will you be able to see some progress and momentum in the near future?
  - How long will the congregation be able to support the current initiative?
- What is the likelihood of success?
  - Are your chosen methods and actions likely to lead to your ultimate goals?
  - What insight and advice can you gain from the experience of other congregations?
  - Are there any systemic barriers that must be addressed before you can proceed?