



Strategies for Strengthening Young Adult Ministry: Building Connections

This guide focuses on actions that can improve young adults' connection to others in their age group, and people of all ages within and beyond congregations. Once a young adult is in the door, or has been attending for a few months (or even years), it's important for them to have opportunities to deepen connections and grow spiritually within your community. When young adults feel connected, accepted and valued, they are more likely to stay and share their gifts.

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. For each aspect of congregational life below, you'll find an explanation of common challenges, strategies to try and resources to explore. The "Challenges congregations face" sections are drawn from experiences in Canadian congregations, and real stories from the [Canadian Young Adult Survey](#).

There are dozens of ideas in the "Strategies to try" sections, 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 young adults that currently attend.

If your congregation is new to this work, a great first step is to complete the Congregational Young Adult Ministry Self-Assessment - available on the [CUC Young Adult Ministry Resources page](#).

Strategies to explore:

- Implement a "connect and engage" team 2
- Host a young adult dinner or event 3
- Young adult-specific groups and activities 5
- Improve "caring community" mechanisms 6
- Encourage regional and national connections 8
- Factors to consider in choosing next steps 10



Implement a “connect and engage” team

Young adults often long for a deeper level of connection and commitment, but may not know how to find and access opportunities in a congregation. A “connect and engage program” acknowledges that it’s not always easy to become more connected or to get more involved, and people of all ages may need some prompting and support.

Connect and Engage is an idea that came from the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, though similar initiatives exist in other congregations. At Toronto First, the Connect and Engage Team have a table in a central location every Sunday, staffed by a team volunteer who asks people a single question: “Are you as connected here as you would like to be?”. This question offers an easy opening to a conversation about becoming more connected with your UU community and doesn’t assume that someone is new. The volunteer is well connected in the congregation and knowledgeable about the programs, events and opportunities that exist. If the congregant responds that they would like to be more connected, the volunteer can help link them to programs and events, or can help them feel more connected in other ways.

Many congregations have a membership or welcome committee that can fulfill a similar function.

Challenges congregations face:

- Young adults (even those that are lifelong UUs) are often asked “Are you new here?”, which can be hurtful and alienating.
- After the initial welcome and introduction period, young adults may feel unsure of their next steps. How do they get more connected and make friends? How do they start a spiritual practice? How do they deepen their experiences with the congregation and with our faith?
- We generally do not offer a set “pathway” for newcomers to become integrated into a congregation, so some may stay at a shallow level of engagement because they do not know how to get more involved.
- Opportunities offered to young adults are not always the ones they are seeking (like being on the board), but with a lack of other options, they take on roles and tasks that are unfulfilling or are more responsibility than they want.
- There may not be a central location to get more information about congregational events, programs and volunteer opportunities.
- Young adults may come in and out of a community, depending on life circumstances, and may need to get reacquainted with a congregation’s opportunities.
- Young adults may be long-time UUs who move to a different city for school or work and become newcomers again. They may need some support to adapt to a new congregation, while continuing to grow spiritually.

Strategies to try:

- **Implement a Connect and Engage table**, or integrate similar ideas into your existing greeting and welcoming structure.
 - Evaluate whether this would be a useful addition to your congregation, and whether there is volunteer capacity and interest to make it happen.



- If there is a good existing welcome program, consider expanding the mandate of those volunteers to ask any congregant if they are as connected as they would like to be.
 - Ensure that greeters and people who staff welcome tables are well-versed in congregational activities, and that they are able to connect people to those programs.
 - Additional recommendations for welcoming and outreach can be found in the “Strategies for Strengthening Young Adult Ministry: Welcome and Outreach” guide.
 - Consult the [Guidance for Welcome and Membership Committees](#) - A useful summary of tips for welcoming young adults.
 - Make sure that bulletin boards and welcome tables have congregational material on hand.
 - This may include recent newsletters, a calendar of upcoming events, contact information for volunteers and staff, and anything else that you need to connect a young adult with the activity they are interested in.
 - If activities require advance registration, make sure that it’s possible to sign up on a Sunday morning. A volunteer should help newcomers sign up for activities if they express interest, instead of referring them to the website or an email contact.
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Host a young adult dinner or event

Several congregations have held successful events to help young adults connect with each other and with congregational leaders and staff. Although young adults may also organize their own group activities, they can really appreciate attending something they don’t need to plan. We recommend providing a meal, like lunch after service or a dinner with some social time, where the food is provided by the congregation. The meal can be paired with some social time, games, group activities, or a town hall meeting to discuss how young adults can become more engaged in the congregation.

When a minister fosters connections with young adults, they feel much more connected to the congregation and may feel more comfortable accessing pastoral care when they need it. Whether or not your congregation has a minister, other staff and leaders can also host successful young adult events. Getting support and attention from those in leadership sends a signal that young adult ministry is central to the work and mission of the congregation.

Challenges congregations face:

- Young adults may not know the minister, staff or leaders, especially if they do not come to church regularly or are not very involved.
- Some young adults, especially those who are new to religious communities, may not know what the minister does, or how the minister can provide support in a time of need.
- If the ministers, staff and leaders aren’t directly involved with young adults, it may give the impression that young adult ministry is not a priority for the congregation.
- Congregations give young adults the freedom to organize events and use church space as they like, but do not offer additional planning support. Young adults who are over-committed and in



leadership positions in other areas of their lives are often quite happy to attend events and activities that they don't have to plan.

Strategies to try:

- Work with the minister (or other staff and leaders) and volunteers to plan and make a meal for young adults.
 - Plan the event well in advance and provide a lot of notice, as many young adults are busy with evening and weekend commitments.
 - It's helpful if the minister or leaders extend a personal invite to young adults where possible, through a conversation on Sunday morning, or a phone call.
- Invite specific leaders to attend and get to know young adults, such as board members, lay pastoral care providers, the music director, or leaders who organize activities that are of interest to young adults.
- Organize some simple games or get-to-know-you activities for the event to help young adults and the minister or leaders to get to know each other.
 - Have conversation cards on tables with questions to answer.
 - Simple icebreakers can really help people interact and create memories together.
- Plan (or encourage the minister to plan) regular times for the minister and young adults to get together. Here are a few ideas that congregations have used:
 - Ice cream sundaes after church
 - A regular dinner, brunch or pub night
 - Discussions about the service or other topics of interest
- If your congregation is far from where young adults live, the minister can hold drop in "office hours" at a coffee shop or pub in a central location.
- Make sure that young adults understand the minister's role in the congregation, and how they can access pastoral care.
 - Provide information about pastoral care as part of the welcome process or courses for newcomers.
 - Invite young adults to access support when they need it, and remind them that it is available if they are struggling.
 - Members of the welcome committee can provide email introductions to the minister if that is helpful.



Young adult-specific groups and activities

Most young adults really value multigenerational connections - this may be one of the main reasons they are drawn to congregational life. However, many also want to connect and develop friendships with other young adults in their faith community. If your congregation already has a young adult group or regular activities, there may be ways to provide more institutional support to help them thrive. If there are no regular young adult activities, this may be something to pursue, depending on your local situation and number of young adults.

If young adults see that the congregation is actively supporting them with volunteer or staff time, money, space and other resources, they will know that they are valued. Sometimes a bit of institutional support and structure can help maintain a young adult group or activity and lighten the burden on leaders and volunteers.

Challenges congregations face:

- Too few young adults are present to start or maintain a regular group.
- Not all young adults attend regularly, making it difficult for them to meet and get to know each other. Some young adults may work on Sundays and may only be able to attend activities at other times of the week.
- Young adults are present, but there is no organizing drive or energy to create and maintain regular activities. No one within the group has the capacity to take leadership.
- Young adults are given “free reign” to create their own programs and events, without receiving needed congregational support. Therefore, activities may not get off the ground, or may not be sustainable over time.
- Congregations assume that young adults only want age-specific activities, and do not provide enough structured ways for young adults to form multigenerational connections.
- A young adult group or activity may happen for a while, driven by one or two organizers, and then fizzles out when those people leave or are not able to continue organizing.

Strategies to try:

- Ask young adults what they are looking for at church. You can do this by organizing a town hall meeting, doing a survey, making individual calls, or talking to young adults when they attend.
 - What kinds of multigenerational or young adult-specific activities would they find most meaningful?
 - What capacity do they have to organize such activities? Are they interested in taking leadership in this way?
 - What support do they want from congregational staff and leaders?
- Help young adults meet and connect with each other.
 - A staff member or volunteer could help by setting up and maintaining a Facebook group or email list and making sure that newer young adults are added to it.
 - Membership or welcome committee volunteers can introduce young adults to each other, or provide contact information where appropriate.



- If there is interest, work with young adults to schedule regular meetups or events. Some consistency helps young adults work these events into their regular schedule.
 - Explore options for activities and schedules that are best suited to your situation - maybe alternate young adult-specific activities with a multigenerational games night.
 - Start small, evaluate the success of your first few gatherings, and grow from there.
 - Acknowledge that there is no one activity or model that will meet the needs of every young adult - group members should help determine what is most needed.

 - Provide institutional support for young adult activities:
 - Help leaders book a space, making processes, rules and timelines clear.
 - Provide guidance on how to publicize events - help leaders understand all the avenues (newsletter, website, calendar, bulletin boards), contacts and deadlines for submission.
 - If possible, create a budget for young adult activities that helps fund some of the costs, and that can provide subsidies for anyone for whom cost is a barrier.

 - Find out why regular young adult events or groups haven't succeeded or taken off in the past
 - Was it because of a lack of volunteer and leadership capacity?
 - Were events set at inconvenient times?
 - Was cost a barrier to participation?
 - Were young adults actively encouraged to use church space?
 - Did the group receive support and guidance for booking space, accessing funds and publicizing events?
 - Did any older adult leaders or church staff support the group or events in tangible ways?
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Improve “caring community” mechanisms

Feeling forgotten or ignored by the community that should have been there, or claimed that they would be there, is difficult for most people. But for young adults who may not have well established support networks, or may be explicitly seeking a supportive community, that let down can be the signal that a congregation isn't the right place for them.

Conversely, when a congregation comes through and is successful in supporting and caring for its young adult members in times of need, the impact is significant and long lasting. Most congregations have some type of caring and support program to provide meals, phone calls, visits, pastoral care and other types of help to congregants. However, young adults can sometimes fall between the cracks of these systems, especially when they aren't able to attend church regularly and may need the most support.

What systems are in place in your congregation to help keep track of young adult visitors and members, and support them in times of need? What barriers may exist that make it difficult for young adults to know about and access this support? How can people of all ages feel cared for and supported?



Challenges congregations face:

- Young adults going through life transitions, upheaval or mental health struggles are less likely to come to church and can become more and more disconnected from the community.
- There is no mechanism to notice when people are not attending regularly, and when they might have a need for support.
 - The onus is on the person seeking support to reach out, but young adults may not feel comfortable doing that, or may not know what type of support is available.
 - In congregations of every size, there may not be a structured way to be aware of who is participating regularly. Often, there is no list of young adults and no one responsible for checking that list.
- Young adults seek a community that holds them and that they are accountable to, but they end up pursuing other activities and groups when our congregations do not offer that.
 - Though they may need support at times, many young adults want to care for others and develop relationships with people of other ages. However, they may not know how to get involved and contribute to caring initiatives.
- The type of “caring” that congregations typically provide may not be the most helpful or appropriate for young adults.

Strategies to try:

- Ask young adults about their experience with the caring systems in your congregation - Were there times that they needed more support than they got? How would they like to be held by their community in times of hardship?
 - This can be a great question for a town hall or consultation meeting with young adults.
 - A consultation can also reveal the wonderful ways that young adults have been supported by the congregation, and how that support has impacted them.
- Create a buddy or group system where young adults create longer lasting connections with other members, who will notice when they don't come to church or are having a hard time and can connect them with congregational supports.
 - Connections can be made through small group ministry, volunteer teams and structured opportunities to deepen connections at coffee hour.
- Ask young adults how best to communicate and stay in touch with them - email may not be the best method, but they may suggest Facebook messenger, text messages or other ways.
- Determine the best way for your congregation to keep track of young adults who visit and attend regularly.
 - Keeping a simple list of names with contact information is a good way to notice which young adults are still engaged, and which ones haven't been in a while.
 - Determine who will be responsible for this work - is it a staff person, a group of volunteers, the minister, other young adults?
 - Make a plan to check and update the list regularly, and to check in with young adults who have not been involved in a while.



- A small group of volunteers can make phone calls or reach out in other ways to let young adults know that they're an important part of the community and that their absence is noticed.
 - Try out other types of caring. Instead of (or in addition to) baked goods and phone calls, here are some types of support and care that young adults may appreciate:
 - Support by text message or online.
 - Encouragement to meet with a minister or pastoral care chaplain in person.
 - Mentorship and support through life transitions and difficult decisions.
 - Support finding work or making career choices.
 - Support finding housing that is affordable and meets their needs.
 - Social connections with others their age, or people of any age.
 - Support getting more involved and connected in their congregation.
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Encourage regional and national connections

Local congregations can, and should be welcoming, inclusive multigenerational communities where people of all ages can find meaning and connection. Many young adults are actively involved in their congregation - attending regularly, contributing to services, taking leadership and engaging in all aspects of the community. Some young adults have left their "home" congregation to move away for school or work and haven't found a fit with their new congregation. Other young adults are involved in some ways, but for many reasons may not have all their spiritual needs met through Sunday worship and congregational life.

Whether or not they are actively involved in a local congregation, many young adults value the connections they make through regional and national young adult communities and events. The Canadian Unitarian Council and our American partner organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association offer many opportunities for young adults to gather and make meaning together. Congregations large and small should be aware of, and encourage, young adult connections beyond their walls.

Strategies to try:

- Those engaged in welcoming newcomers and helping young adults get involved can become familiar with the main events and opportunities available outside the congregation.
 - Be aware of key dates and registration deadlines, and help inform young adults about what's coming up.
 - Encourage young adults to explore events and online connections, knowing that some may seek these opportunities more than others.
 - All events and programs are listed on the CUC website, and are detailed below:
cuc.ca/congregations-leaders/young-adult-ministry/
- Provide congregational support for young adults to attend regional and national events.



- If possible, designate a budget line or hold a fundraiser to provide funding for young adults who would like to attend a conference or training but need financial support to do so.
- If a fund exists or is created, make sure that young adults know about it well in advance of the event, and know how they can apply for or access it.
- The CUC also offers some subsidies to help with registration and travel costs, though the subsidy is not able to cover all costs.
- Events and programs to be aware of:
 - Gathered Here: A monthly online gathering and spiritual check in for young adults.
 - Find out more: cuc.ca/community/young-adults/gathered-here/
 - Pastoral Care Team: A team of ministers dedicated to providing confidential support by phone, text or email to young adults. This should not replace a congregation's own pastoral care, but can complement existing programs or provide support for young adults in small congregations.
 - Find out more: cuc.ca/community/young-adults/pastoral-care/
 - Young adult events: There are many online and in-person events throughout the year that offer young adults a chance to connect with other young UUs, and explore their faith and spirituality in a different setting.
 - Find out about regular national and regional events and trainings: cuc.ca/community/young-adults/young-adult-events/
 - Consult the CUC Events Calendar for everything coming up: <https://cuc.ca/events-calendar/>
 - Chorus: The annual, national gathering of Canadian UU young adults takes place on the May long weekend. This event is an amazing chance for young adults to connect and learn in an intensive, full weekend conference. It is held in a different place each year and subsidies are available to help with travel and registration.
 - Find out more here: cuc.ca/community/young-adults/chorus/



Factors to consider in choosing next steps

- What is your current young adult population?
 - How many young adults attend? How many are involved in leadership?
 - What are these young adults seeking in congregational life?
 - Is there interest/capacity for young adults to help push this initiative forward?
- Is your outreach or initiative geared toward specific target groups within young adults?
 - Bridging youth and emerging young adults (18-22)
 - Students - could be at nearby university or college campuses
 - Young adults with children
 - Young professionals
 - Demographics and identities that are underrepresented
- 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 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?