



## Strategies for Strengthening Young Adult Ministry: Welcome and Outreach

This guide focuses on actions that change and improve the way you attract and welcome newer young adults to your UU community. Many of these actions will also have a positive impact on newcomers of all ages, and will help create a more comfortable and welcoming environment for all. 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:

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## **Improve your welcoming and greeting processes**

What happens when someone new or “newish” walks through your door on Sunday morning? Are they greeted warmly?

Is it clear what they should do and where they should go?

Are greeters friendly, knowledgeable and able to create a welcoming atmosphere?

Are they able to direct young adults to find more information about our faith, your congregation’s activities and ways to engage and connect with others at church?

Improving your welcoming and greeting systems has an immediate impact in setting the tone of your congregation and drawing people into the worship space, and to your community. For young adults that are new to UUism, new to your congregation, or possibly new to church in general, meeting them with a warm and confident greeting can help ensure that they feel welcome and consider coming back.

Many young adults feel a little apprehensive about coming to church for the first time, or being in a new type of social situation. Young adults are less likely than older generations to try an activity or organization a second time if their first experience was negative. Blessed with a choice of activities and a variety of ways to meet their social and spiritual needs, new young adults need to get an early sense that your congregation could become a welcoming spiritual home where they fit in. Having an organized and well oiled greeting system makes your congregation look professional, together, and tells a newcomer that helping them connect is a big priority for you.

### **Challenges congregations face:**

- Greeters are not always present on Sunday morning, or are focused on people they already know. (Young adults, and especially those who are not familiar with church, say they need a little extra help getting settled and navigating congregational life).
- The congregation doesn’t have a process for choosing greeters, beyond who is available, and so the greeters may not be the best suited for the task of helping newcomers feel welcome.
- Greeters are friendly and well-meaning, but do not know how to interact with young adults in a way that makes them feel welcome and safe. (Some young women report having had uncomfortable interactions with older male greeters, and queer/LGBT young adults have been the subject of inappropriate or invasive questions.)
- Greeters do not know enough about the congregation’s activities to be able to connect newcomers to information and resources that they need to get involved. When newcomers are told to check the website, read the newsletter, or contact a specific person to get involved, it creates a barrier for that person to get connected with the congregation.
- At coffee hour it is not clear where newcomers should go, or who they should talk to. (Young adults have reported leaving services without being approached by anyone, or getting stuck in long, unwanted conversations.)

### **Strategies to try:**

- Ensure **consistency in Sunday morning greeters** - make sure there is always someone there, and train each greeter on how to approach and talk to young adults.



- **Recruit young adult greeters**, if possible. Seeing a diversity of faces helps newcomers feel that there is a place for someone like them at your congregation. Being greeted by a fellow young adult can create a first connection point and a sense of belonging.
- Implement or improve your newcomer or **welcome table**: ensure that there is a designated person and place for new people to get more information before and after the service.
  - Provide instructions and invitations for newcomers in the order of service and announced during worship (i.e. “join us for coffee and conversation in [location] and stop by the welcome table to learn more about us”)
  - Some congregations provide a designated mug colour for newcomers to encourage others to talk to them (make this optional!)
- After the service: Have the **right information available** and at hand for greeters to give to young adults who want to know more. Greeters should have basic knowledge of the congregation’s programs, calendar of upcoming events, and ways to get involved. Ideally, newcomers should be able to sign up on the spot for upcoming events and activities, if they show interest in attending.
  - Be mindful of roadblocks to participation: make it easy and seamless to get involved!
  - If you don’t know the answer to a question, try to find someone who knows instead of referring the newcomer to a website or newsletter. If an introduction or email is required, offer to initiate that instead of asking them to do it.
  - Have easy takeaways for newcomers: a printed calendar of events, a list of recurring congregational activities, flyers for events they could attend, etc.
- **Provide new young adults with the “Young Adults Connect” postcard**, referring them to the CUC website. Greeters should also let young adults know that there are many ways to connect with others their age through online and in-person events (see CUC website).
- **Introduce young adults to others** with whom they may share an affinity (it could be by age, interest/hobby, social justice issue, reason for coming to church, etc). However, do not assume that young adults only want to talk to other young adults - help them connect with people of any age who are friendly, welcoming and engaging.
- If you use **name tags**, have them ready to go for newcomers - do not let them get mired in church bureaucracy or wait months to get an “official” name tag. You may want to provide stick on name tags for first timers, or handwritten temporary name tags that look similar to the permanent ones.
- Share the load: **make welcoming everyone’s responsibility** and weekly spiritual practice! Check out these [Tips for Intentionally Inclusive Congregations](#) for simple ways that every congregant can play a part in creating a culture of welcome.
  - Consider highlighting one of these tips each week in your announcements, order of service and/or newsletter.



## **Key Resources:**

- [Guidance for Welcome and Membership Committees](#) - A useful summary of tips for welcoming young adults. This is a great introductory document to pass on to your membership committee, if they are not yet engaged in this work.
- [The CUC's Tips for Intentionally Inclusive Congregations](#) - A wealth of small, doable actions for anyone who wants to help welcome others.
- [Why Welcome?](#) - Reflection questions for congregations who are seeking more young adult members to help understand underlying motivations and concerns
- [UUA hospitality self-assessment for congregations](#) - how well do you do hospitality and welcoming?
- [Additional CUC tips and resources for membership and outreach](#)
- [Mark Morrison-Reed's 2013 talk on "Radical Inclusion"](#) - An insightful and hard hitting look at diversity and inclusion in Canadian Unitarianism, and potential barriers to improvement. The conclusion is a great read on its own too (starts at the bottom of page 10).

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## **Welcome packets for newer young adults**

A welcome packet is a gift your congregation can give to young adults who are newer to the congregation but who have shown an interest in getting more involved. Giving this token of welcome shows young adults that they are seen and that their presence and involvement are valued.

We recommend including the "Young Adults Connect" postcard about young adults in UUism, a copy of the book *Becoming* and a small chalice or other way to take UU ritual home. You can also include something specific to your congregation, such as a booklet of upcoming activities, a note from the minister, or an object of significance.

## **Challenges congregations face:**

- After coming to church a few times, a newer young adult may want to find ways to extend their spiritual practice and faith development outside of Sunday morning, but they may not know how to do that.
  - Few young adults own their own chalice, unless they are gifted one.
- Young adults who only have experience of their local congregation are not aware of the larger UU world, and the variety of ways they can participate in this faith. If there are few other young people, they may feel isolated but want to connect with others their age.
- Young adults, and other members of the congregation may not know where to look for information on programs, events and groups outside of their congregation that can offer important ways to connect with others their age.
- Congregations may not know how to officially welcome a new young adult in, besides having them join as a member or inviting them to take leadership. An intermediate step is a helpful and



low-pressure way to invite young adults to connect further and let them know you want to have them involved.

### **Strategies to try:**

- Give out welcome packets to young adults who have come a few times and are interested in a deeper connection with the congregation.
- Assemble welcome packets:
  - Acquire copies of the Becoming book (through the CUC or the UUA bookstore).
  - Buy or make small clay pot chalices (**see instructions on the last page**).
  - Add a personal touch - maybe someone in your congregation can sew simple bags, or decorate boxes to house the welcome packets.
  - Add a letter of welcome from the minister or congregational leadership.
- There are other alternatives to this specific welcome packet that can help extend spiritual practices outside of Sunday morning - some congregations have a traveling chalice, journal and book of readings that change hands each week.
- Maybe there is a token or small object specific to your congregation that would be meaningful to give young adults in the welcome packet.

### **Key Resources:**

- Instructions for making clay pot chalices - on the last page of this document.
- To get free “Young Adult Connect” postcards for your congregation, email [young-adults@cuc.ca](mailto:young-adults@cuc.ca).
- [UUA Bookstore Becoming book](#) - A wonderful compendium of reflections by UU young adults, quotes, poems and stories that address themes relevant to young adulthood.

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## **Initiatives to help older congregants talk to young adults**

Organize a workshop (or a series of events) in your congregation to help educate older adults about how to engage with young adults in a positive, respectful way.

One of the biggest issues that we’ve heard through the young adult survey and anecdotal evidence, is that coffee hour can be an uncomfortable experience for many young adults. Older adults can be eager to talk to young adults, but don’t always know how to do it well in a way that leaves both people feeling good about the conversation. An awkward or hurtful interaction at coffee hour can be a major deterrent for young adults, and even cause them to not return to church. But conversely, being made to feel welcome and included in that setting can have a lasting positive impact!



### **Challenges congregations face:**

- Young adults, new and long term, can have unpleasant experiences at coffee hour which can make them feel unwelcome.
- Many congregations know this is a problem but don't have a structured way to address it.
- Older adults who want to interact with young adults don't feel comfortable starting conversations and might benefit from guidance.
- Coffee hour does not always follow the service well - there aren't opportunities to talk about the service or the morning's themes, or to participate in spiritual discussions.
- Young adults are sometimes ignored at coffee hour and leave without anyone having talked to them.

### **Strategies to try:**

- Plan a workshop for older adults and provide some education on ways to approach and talk to young adults at coffee hour.
  - Use the "Coffee Hour Caution" poster as inspiration, or consult CUC staff for ideas
  - Consult young adults in your congregation about their experiences in coffee hour and ask them what they'd like congregants to know
  - Encourage congregants to start with neutral questions, such as "What brought you here today?" and "What did you think of the service?"
- Recruit and train some coffee hour greeters that roam around coffee hour and look out for people who are looking for more connection, including young adults.
- Re-structure your coffee hour by adding tables, or an alternative space for people to have discussions related to the morning's theme.
- Have activity stations at coffee hour so that people can get to know each other in more structured ways. Ideas include: a puzzle table, board games, conversation starter cards.
- Provide post-service opportunities for small group check ins and for more structured ways for young adults to get to know other congregants.

### **Key Resources:**

- [Coffee Hour Caution poster](#) - This is a great resource that offers ideas about better ways to approach and talk to young adults. However, we do not recommend putting it up on a bulletin board in your congregation. That signals to newer young adults that they may not have good interactions with your community (and a poster isn't the best way to effect cultural change in a congregation).
- ["Warm not cool"](#) - A great Washington Post article about how churches can attract and retain young adults by focusing on being "warm, not cool".



## **Improve outreach and web presence**

Many people think that a good website or social media presence will impress and draw in young adults, when in reality most people of this generation assume that organizations will have a decent website as a baseline. However, an unattractive website that is difficult to navigate and lacks crucial information for visitors is a glaring message to young adults that your congregation may not be well suited to their age group.

A great website provides a (hopefully representative) snapshot of your congregation and entices young adults to find out more or visit. Social media presence makes your congregation searchable and allows young adults to share your content and events on the platforms that they use.

### **Challenges congregations face:**

- Website does not seem inviting, visually appealing, or does not represent who the congregation is with pictures, stories and current updates.
- Website does not include essential information for visitors, or the information is hard to find.
- Website is not at all visitor oriented, and contains acronyms, jargon or inside terms that may alienate prospective visitors or newer members.
- There is no social media presence so young adults do not find the congregation in the places where they normally search.
- Social media presence is spread thin over too many platforms that aren't well used or maintained.
- UUs are present at, and help organize non-UU events and initiatives, but they never identify themselves with the congregation - missing a great promotional opportunity.
- Congregation misses out on opportunities to promote themselves through organizations that already engage young adults.

### **Strategies to try:**

- Recruit some friends who are not affiliated with your congregation to look over your website and give honest feedback from an outsider's perspective.
  - CUC YaYA staff can also help by giving congregational websites a review.
- Use the CUC's website checklist to make sure your website has basic information that visitors need, and that it is friendly and accessible to younger people.
  - [Find the checklist here!](#)
- Create a basic social media presence - focus on maintaining a Facebook page for your congregation that can be maintained by staff or volunteers.
  - Update Facebook page with upcoming events (especially your next Sunday service details) at least once a week.
  - Make sure it has your congregation's location and contact information.
- If social media is not your strength, streamline your approach and do not try to take on more than you can maintain and update (stick with a Facebook page for now).



- If there is capacity, consider creating an Instagram account to showcase photos of congregational life. Instagram is currently the social media platform most widely used by teenagers and young adults.
- Brainstorm ways to have a more visible presence at community events and spaces where young adults may take notice.

#### **Key Resources:**

- [Checklist for Congregational Websites](#) - A detailed checklist to help ensure your congregational website is accessible to newcomers and young adults, and has the minimum information expected.
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## **Improve Accessibility**

If young adults have trouble getting to your church, or attending your events and services, they will not feel very welcome and will not be able to participate regularly. Taking stock of the barriers that exist to their participation, and addressing those barriers, will show young adults that you want them to be a part of your community.

Improving accessibility creates opportunities for young adult participation, and shows them that you prioritize their involvement - even if they don't have a car, or a lot of money.

#### **Challenges congregations face:**

- Church building is not very accessible by public transit, or is far from the city centre and places where young adults are likely to live.
- There is no coordinated way to connect young adults with rides to and from church.
- The timing of events is not conducive to young adults who work full time (i.e. if most events are held during the day on weekdays).
- Childcare is sometimes an afterthought, or it is not clearly advertised that there will be childcare available.
- Young parents may face backlash or feel uncomfortable if they bring their babies and young children to Sunday service - this signals that they are not welcome in the community as they are.
- Young adults that are students, low income or underemployed may not be able to contribute financially or pay entry to church events that are costly.
- The casual way we talk about money, or assume that everyone is from a middle-class background, creates barriers and cultural divides for young adults. This gives an overall impression that if someone isn't financially comfortable, they do not fit in.





**Strategies to try:**

- Assess how accessible your congregation and events are in many different ways, including the timing of events.
- Encourage carpooling with a signup sheet, or by connecting individual young adults with church members that live near them. If you see a young adult leaving, ask them if they need a ride.
- Look at your events for the month - when are they scheduled? Do the ones that would attract young adults take place in the evening or on a weekend? Are young adults consulted when events are planned to ensure that some are well timed for them?
- Create a consistent approach to offering childcare at events, so that young parents can count on it, or make sure to advertise that childcare will be available well in advance.
- Arrange for baby minders to be present at the back of the worship hall to offer relief to parents of infants, if desired - they deserve to have a worshipful time as well and will probably appreciate the thought that went into the offer.
- Make sure there is a nursery space where young parents can be with their infants and still listen to the service (this could be in addition to, or instead of the previous suggestion).
- Do an inventory of the cost of events at your church over the past few months:
  - Are the prices accessible to young adults and low-income folks?
  - Are there sliding scale or “pay what you can” options available?
  - And are those options clearly advertised in advance and at the event?
- How is money talked about in your congregation? Assess whether there are ways to make people with less financial privilege feel more comfortable and welcome.
- Work with your stewardship or pledge committee to improve the way they reach out to young adults and include people who are not able to make a significant financial pledge - is it clear that young adults can contribute in other ways, and are still welcome and valued?



## **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?



## Homemade Clay Pot Chalice Instructions



You can make clay pot chalices to give to young adults (or children/youth/adults) as a welcome gift for less than \$3 per chalice. Instructions are below.

### What you need:

1. Clay saucer (available at Michael's craft store) - 3 inch is pictured above.
2. Clay pot (available at Michael's craft store) - 1.5 inch is pictured above.
3. Glue
4. Paint (acrylic works well)
5. Paint brushes
6. Tea lights if you'd like to get people started with a fully functional chalice
7. People who enjoy art projects to help with painting!



### Notes:

- For potted plants, the pot usually sits in the saucer. For a chalice, invert the pot and place the saucer on top.
- It can be easier to paint first and then glue the saucer and pot together once they're dry.
- It works well, and is more "chalice-like," to have the saucer one size larger than the pot.
- If giving them out in small numbers, you may want to ask people for their favourite colour to keep in mind while painting/selecting a chalice for them.