



Strategies for Strengthening Young Adult Ministry: Worship and Ministry

This guide focuses on actions your congregation can take to make worship and ministry opportunities more inclusive of young adults. Many of these actions will also have a positive impact on congregants of all ages, and help meet diverse needs in your congregation. 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.

A Sunday service is central to most congregations' programming and community, and is likely the main way that young adults experience your congregation. Young adults are a diverse group with diverse needs - about half the respondents to the [Canadian Young Adult Survey](#) enjoyed the tradition and ritual of a typical Sunday worship, while the other half were looking for more innovative or interactive styles of worship and spiritual community. Most young adults are also seeking opportunities for deeper spiritual exploration and connection with people of all generations through programs like small group ministry.

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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Consistency and quality of worship services

In your congregation, how often does a worship leader encourage people to come back several times because all services are different? In principle, that's not a bad thing - we value diversity in our services and programs. However, if this is a disclaimer that tells a visitor that some services are better than others, it may be beneficial to create more consistency in worship services. For a young adult visitor or newcomer, it can be helpful to know that worship services will have a basic caliber, and some consistent elements to provide a sense of UU identity.

Consistently high-quality services convey confidence, organization and professionalism, and give newer young adults the sense that your congregation has something concrete to offer. Having some consistent elements and rituals can help young adults feel more comfortable and familiar with your congregation. A bad service can be an awkward experience for any newcomer, but young adults are even less likely than to come back a second time, and will likely look for other communities to meet their spiritual needs.

Challenges congregations face:

- Worship services are so different from each other, in content and/or format, that it's hard for newcomers to get a sense of what the congregation, or our faith is all about. This is especially important for young adults who seek some routine and ritual in a religious community.
- Very inconsistent services can give the impression that the congregation is disorganized, or that there it lacks a unifying culture or purpose.
- Services lack a consistent quality of speakers, production, music or other factors. A low quality service can be an immediate deterrent for a young adult visitor, and they may not stick around to see if other services are better.
- The congregation has a good range and quality of speakers and worship leaders, but services lack essential spiritual or religious elements.
 - Some speakers or sermons remain at a surface level and lack the spiritual depth that young adults are looking for.
 - Sermons that are overly academic may be less appealing to young adults, especially those that are students and are looking for something different on Sunday morning.

Strategies to try:

- Consult with young adults:
 - If young adults are present, ask them what parts of the service they find most meaningful, and what they would like to see in future worship services.
 - Ask younger newcomers and active members what drew them to the congregation and how they experienced their first few services.
 - If possible, try to get feedback from young adults who chose not to return, or who left the congregation. This may be difficult to arrange, but would provide useful insights.



- Assess past services. In your team, or with your worship committee, have a look back at the last few months of services and ask:
 - What impression do those services convey?
 - Do you feel that topics and content have relevance and appeal for young adults?
 - Is there purpose and vision behind the type of services and topics chosen?
 - Is there consistency week-to-week that would help newcomers settle in and get to know congregational practices and Unitarian Universalism?

- Work toward greater consistency:
 - Assess which of your congregation's rituals and practices create a sense of consistency and meaning on Sunday morning.
 - How could existing rituals be maintained and improved, without making the service feel rote or formulaic?
 - Within an established structure, are there opportunities to innovate and build in more dynamic worship elements? See the next section for ideas.
 - Think about how newcomers engage with the service - Is it easy for them to understand how to participate?

- Assess diversity of leaders:
 - Do the service leaders or worship associates reflect the diversity of your congregation?
 - Do people in visible positions on Sunday morning reflect the diversity of the community outside of the congregation? If not, how might that be seen by newcomers?
 - Are there any young adult worship leaders, or any young adults that would be interested in those roles?

Key Resources:

- Worship books and resources on the CUC website: [This page](#) focuses on resources for young adult ministry, and [this page](#) includes general worship resources.
- [The UUA's page on spirituality and worship for young adults](#): Includes many additional resources and links about young adult worship styles, inclusivity on Sunday mornings, and more.
- [Resources for going deeper in worship](#): A great list of books and resources to help congregations build worship services that "go deeper" spiritually - something that appeals to most young adults.
- [Spiritually Vital and Alive: Contemporary Worship for UU Young Adults by Michael Tino](#): An older, but still useful, summary of young adult contemporary worship. Includes useful insights on what young adults are looking for in worship services.

Try new worship elements and styles

Young adults are diverse with diverse needs - some like the traditions and rituals of regular Sunday worship, and some crave different ways to be together on Sunday. Varying worship elements



and styles will definitely appeal to some young adults, and help them engage in the service. These changes may also meet the needs of people of all ages who benefit from more interactive worship services.

To appeal to a variety of worship goers, try incorporating aspects of youth and young adult circle worship, a wider variety of music, and interactive elements. If done well, these additions can convey your congregation's openness to new ideas, willingness to have fun and experiment, and will broaden the worship experience for all.

Challenges congregations face:

- It can be hard to balance the desire for consistency in worship with an openness to new ideas and different ways of being together.
- Congregants are attached to the style of worship they know, and may be resistant to change.
- There may be cultural divides between older members (often from a more secular tradition), and younger members who want a deeper and more moving spiritual experience on Sundays.
- There is conflict between the needs of leaders who did not grow up UU and have not experienced youth or young adult worship, and young adults who were raised UU and don't find that typical worship meets their needs.
- Changes and new approaches to worship require volunteer and staff capacity. Not every congregation has those resources to spare, or staff and worship leaders may be stretched too thin to take on anything new.
- There is openness to trying out worship styles that are of interest to young adults, but there is not enough institutional support to make that possible. Young adults can certainly provide leadership here, but should also be supported by other leaders to make changes.
- Congregations try out a second or alternative worship service but find it hard to make it work. See below for tips and cautions when considering alternative services.

Strategies to try:

A) Making changes to existing services:

- Take the time to consult with young adults and congregants of all ages before making any changes. See questions and ideas in the previous section about consistency in worship.
- Consult resources for youth and young adult worship to learn new activities, songs and worship styles. See "key resources" in the previous section.
- Start with small changes:
 - Make an existing worship element more engaging and dynamic (i.e. sing a new hymn, use songs from youth and young adult worship, or try songs in a round).
 - Try out new elements one at a time so that the congregation can adapt to the change, and so you can assess what works and what doesn't.
 - Consider using a wider variety of sources for music, hymns, readings and speakers, with attention to cultural appropriation and attribution.
 - Use music and periods of silence to create a more meditative atmosphere.



- Stick to what feels authentic to your congregation, and what is possible to maintain over time with current levels of staff and volunteers.
- If they are not already involved, ask individual young adults if they want to participate in the service by doing readings, leading discussions, doing the homily or sermon, reading a story, etc.
- Take inspiration from youth worship - ask youth what they would want to see in a worship service. This will make services more youth-friendly, and likely more young adult-friendly too.
- Provide more opportunities during and after the service for people to reflect and share what touched them about the service. Encourage people to discuss this at coffee hour.
- If it's possible in your space, try varying the setup of your worship space - arrange the chairs in a circle, or encourage people to sit closer together up front.

B) Adding alternative worship opportunities

- Assess whether an additional worship service is right for your congregation:
 - Is there enough demand for a regular worship outside of Sunday morning?
 - Could changes be made to existing services to meet the needs of more people?
 - Is there staff and volunteer capacity to create and sustain regular services outside of Sunday morning?
 - Would an alternative service attract and engage new young adults, or those who do not attend regularly?
- Some options for alternative worship timing and formats:
 - A weekly second service in the evening, in “Soulful Sundown” style, that is largely based on music, silence and meditation.
 - A monthly or bi-monthly alternative worship service held at a time that works for young adults. It is helpful to set a regular schedule, and advertise services well in advance.
 - A weekly structured time for connection and spiritual experience after service. This could include a discussion group, a quiet meditation space or song circle.
 - A regular time for young adults to worship together, supported by congregational leaders and staff. This could be paired with a meal and/or small group ministry.
- Tips for creating a Soulful Sundown service:
 - Consult with and involve young adults in planning and leading the service, while providing support and guidance.
 - Incorporate longer periods of silence and meditative music than on Sunday mornings, to create a different type of worship experience.
 - Try singing hymns and chants in rounds. Choose simple songs that can be sung without accompaniment, and can be easily taught by song leaders.
 - Read this useful [guide to Taize-style worship in UU communities](#), which includes a list of songs in our hymnals that are great for meditative singing.
 - Use recorded music to help create a worshipful space, and to cut down on planning and preparation time for leaders.
 - Look up examples of Soulful Sundown services, [such as this one](#), or examples of youth and young adult-style worships to get ideas.



- As with anything new, start small and simple and grow from there. Continue to evaluate the success of a new service, while giving it enough time to develop and become successful.

Small group ministry

Small group ministry (sometimes called chalice groups, journey groups, or other names) can be a great way to engage young adults, provide opportunities for spiritual growth and personal development, and foster strong multigenerational connections. Participating in a small group can make a big difference in a young adult's experience of congregational life. Aside from connecting them to the congregation and to others, these groups can provide support and friendships that extend beyond the congregation's walls.

Small groups take some planning and investment to start up and maintain, but they are one of the most effective ways for young adults to become more engaged and connected. In bigger congregations, small groups can really help young adults find their place and develop relationships in a structured way.

Challenges congregations face:

- The congregation does not have any small group ministry or opportunities for people of all ages to connect in smaller groups.
- Even if there are activities outside of Sunday worship, there are few opportunities for spiritual deepening and personal growth. Young adults often need more structured ways to engage with people of all ages and explore Unitarian Universalism and spirituality.
- There is a small group ministry program at the congregation, but young adults are not involved. Or, it is difficult for newcomers to join existing groups.
- The congregation used to have a small group ministry, but there wasn't enough staff or volunteer capacity to keep it going.
- There is interest in developing a small group ministry program, but not enough staff and institutional support to make it happen. A completely volunteer-run small group ministry can be difficult to start and maintain over the long term.

Strategies to try:

- If there is no current small group ministry:
 - Consider starting a small group ministry program by assessing your congregation's needs, staff and volunteer capacity.
 - Talk to other congregations who have succeeded in starting and maintaining small group ministries - [contact the congregational life lead](#) for your region to get connected.
 - Research models of small groups to see which ones may work for your local context, and which ones have the best chance of engaging young adults.
 - When starting a new small group ministry, try out smaller scale ideas first, like hosting discussions after church, or check ins during coffee hour time. Try starting one or two new groups and expanding from there.



- Institutional support is key in a thriving, sustainable small group ministry. Having start up support from a minister or other staff member can help encourage participation and create a successful model going forward.
- If young adults aren't involved in small groups:
 - Consult with young adults to find out whether they may be interested in participating. Find out whether there is a barrier to their participation, like not knowing how to sign up, or the schedule of small groups.
 - Make sure that the membership team and those working with young adults help promote small groups as a way of getting more connected.
 - Consider making changes to make small groups more accessible to young adults. This can include providing childcare, arranging rides, having a meal, or changing the time.
 - Ensure that small group facilitators are well trained and prepared to help create a welcoming environment for young adults.
 - Find out if any young adults are interested in becoming facilitators themselves. This can be a great leadership opportunity and can encourage other young adults to participate.
 - Provide adequate training and support, and consider mentorship with an experienced small group facilitator.
 - Have or develop a system to address any issues that come up within small groups. For example, if there is a racist or homophobic incident, or if a group member is asking inappropriately toward a young adult. Ensure that there is a way to deal with conflict and bring people back into right relationship where possible.

Key Resources:

- [Small Group Ministry Network](#): Includes free and paid resources and guides for small groups, from a UU perspective. Many are individual themed guides, but there are also some compilations.
- The UUA's [Small Group Ministry page for Young Adults](#): Links to small group guides that are specifically for young adults, as well as guides with themes that would work well for young adults.
- [Becoming Together: A small group ministry manual](#) for the book "Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood". The book is available on Amazon as an e-book, and also from the UUA bookstore. Contact Asha if you want copies of the book - the CUC has a number of copies that we give out to young adults.
- [Heart to Heart](#), [Soul to Soul](#) and [Listening Hearts](#) by Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins: Three books of templates and plans for small group ministry sessions. Books available from InSpirit, the UUA Bookstore.
- [The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry](#): An accessible guide to creating small group ministry programs. Available through the UUA Bookstore.



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?