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Young Adults & Beyond: Final Report

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Casey Stainsby, Youth and Young Adult Program Manager &
Rev. Danie Webber, Youth and Young Adult Ministry

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Background and Objectives

The Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) provides programming and services to young adults (YAs) ages 18-35. While this community is a wonderful source of Unitarian Universalist (UU) connection and spiritual sustenance for many, we're also aware of some gaps. For example, the emerging adult (EA) category (18-24) does not seem to be well served by our current offerings. On the other end, there is also a desire for continuing a YA-style community for those who are over 35. In recognizing these gaps we developed a survey to determine what the needs and ideas are for those who are most directly involved in the young adult community.

Using this information we hope to offer a plan moving forward for supporting those who are not currently well served, as well as information for the CUC staff team and larger UU community about where opportunities exist to expand young adult-style community for people outside of the current age range. The scope of this project is to make recommendations for CUC programs only, not to define or direct the young adult ministries of congregations or other groups.

Feedback was collected between December 2023-March 2024, with a multi-platform report back session offered at Chorus and virtually in May 2024. This process and final report were carried out by Casey Stainsby and Rev. Danie Webber of the CUC's youth and young adult ministry team.

Methodology

We created a survey that asked respondents to self-identify their age range, "felt" life stage, and to share their thoughts on how the CUC might best support each sub-group within an expansive range of young-adulthood.

- An sample of these questions include (entire survey attached as *Appendix 1*):
 - What do you see as the unique needs of emerging adults (18-24 year olds)?
 - What are your ideas for how the CUC might better minister to emerging adults, and equip UU communities to better minister to them?
 - What do you see as the unique needs of young adults in their late 20s and early 30s?
 - If the CUC is going to continue to support a young adult age-range with specific community building and faith formation opportunities, what age range do you think makes the most sense? (ie. where would our resources have the most impact towards our goal of building vital multigenerational communities?) What gaps would be left, and how might these be addressed?



Participants were invited to fill in the survey, respond to emails, and/or participate in a live community conversation, of which we organized six (one for each of the respondent categories and one additional). Below you will find a table showing how many responses were received via each method.

Note 1: One person could respond using multiple methods, and each response was counted as a separate data point. Therefore the total number of responses exceeds the total number of participants.

Note 2: The Community Conversations and email responses did not follow the exact structure of the survey questions. We wanted to use the same questions to guide our conversations while also allowing conversations to flow naturally. Notes from these conversations, as well as email responses, were gathered and themes among the responses were identified. An example of this coding can be found in *Appendix 3*.

Number of Responses per Collection Method

Respondent Categories / Methods	Youth (14-19)	Emerging Adults (18-24)	Young Adults (25-35)	Super Friends (35+)	Adults / DREs (50+)
Survey	2	7	7	5	1
Community Conversations	0	7	5	6	5
Email Responses (best guesses as to age/role)	0	11	6	0	0
Totals	2	25	18	11	6



Results: Highlights by Theme

1. Age range

- What we heard:
 - All questions were answered in long text form. Given the variety, we grouped recommendations into three categories:
 - Create emerging adult specific programs (15 responses)
 - Leave the age range the same (6 responses)
 - Open the top end of the age range (13 responses)
 - There were also a number of responses that suggested having more overlap between the age ranges, so that transitions could be made slowly and at a pace each individual could choose.
 - We received a significant number of requests and statements about the unique needs of 19-24 year olds (22 comments, compared to 8 comments about 25-35 year olds and 15 comments about people in their 30s to 40s).
 - Quote from one young adult: *“If we lose the large YA age range, I worry that we will further separate our young people from the old, deepening the wounds of the bridge to nowhere. The long YA period did not heal those wounds, it is just a band aid, but until we figure out a better way to really bridge the communities and provide multigen and intergen opportunities to connect regardless of age, shortening the age span of YA is tearing off the band aid without any plans to actually address the injury. I think in general, we need the transitions between age groups to be less abrupt, with more overlap and fuzzier edges, to make the transitions less traumatic.”*
- Recommendations for the CUC:
 - Offer an EA specific program - this might look like a small group ministry (such as a Wellspring or Soul Matters program), regular unprogrammed gathering (such as ‘study group’ or coffee hangout) or some other offering.
 - Experiment with a more expansive age range/definition for YA events and programs - maybe this looks like welcoming people over 35 to Gathered Here, or to the Unicamp Young Adult Retreat.
- Outstanding questions:
 - Do we continue to offer 18-35 only spaces, or focus on 19-24 and be more intentional about intergenerational spaces for 25+? We recognize that if we are going to highlight EA specific programming without taking away or stopping any of our current programming this may stretch our resources over capacity, and potentially create additional walls between our age categories.



2. Intergenerational connections

- What we heard:
 - There were significant requests for more intergenerational community building - this included mentors, creating friendships, and creating intergenerational events that are organized by young adults or focused on YA-style community building.
 - A few comments that focused on intentional relationship building at closer age categories (between youth and EA, between EA and YAs, between YAs and SuperFriends)
 - Quote from one young adult: *“An essential precondition to changing the age range for YA programming is to make big changes that encourage connections and getting to know one another across age categories, within our congregations and across the country. Having age-cohort-specific spaces can be really special, but you inevitably age out of them, and finding kindred spirits in the larger congregation or organization can be really hard, especially if we haven't had any practice in how to actually become friends with people in different generations.”*
- Recommendations for the CUC:
 - Create more intentional intergenerational offerings!
 - Please note: This does NOT mean simply inviting young adults (and children and youth) into programs that currently mostly serve adult communities. Intergenerational programming needs to be planned and organized with an intergenerational team. Having youth and young adults participating in the whole planning process and listening to and incorporating their suggestions is necessary for programming to be truly meaningful for all ages.
 - The CUC should make a priority of helping congregations do this work, including increasing outreach to remind congregations that support from CUC staff is available (via the Youth & Young Adult Ministry Specialist portfolio or equivalent staff position as well as through Congregational Life staff).
 - Lift up fishbowl activities¹ as a great facilitation tool to help groups with different experiences better understand each other. Fishbowls might help with bridge building between smaller age gaps as well as with the larger generational divides.

¹ Here's one example of [how to lead a fishbowl](#).



- Explore possibilities for the CUC to encourage and support mentorship programs. This could be a great opportunity to build cross-generational relationships within a purposeful container, and several respondents mentioned that mentorship is something they want in their lives. For the CUC, this might look like creating resources to make it easier for congregations to facilitate these types of connections, or administering a program ourselves.

3. Congregational culture

- What we heard:
 - Several comments mentioned experiencing ageism within their local UU community, including being treated in a patronizing or infantilizing manner, as well as coming up against other unwelcoming practices and microaggressions.
 - There is a desire to have better support for the transitions between age categories within local congregations - this includes holistic preparations for Bridging rituals, institutional support for YA ministry, clearer communication in terms of understanding pathways to membership and volunteering, and many comments about the helpful role mentors could play.
- Recommendations for the CUC:
 - Continue to support congregational culture change alongside the whole CUC staff team. This may include collaborating with the Justice & Equity team regarding their inclusivity work (currently, the UU Expressions Project) and partnering with Congregational Life as they incorporate an intergenerational lens in all their work.
 - Create resources for congregational leaders on how to organize caucussing spaces, with the goal of fostering a critical mass of resourced, connected people of marginalized identities.

4. Bonus! Miscellaneous thoughts

- Barriers to participation
 - There were several mentions of financial barriers and time restraints (with busy and unpredictable school/work/family schedules).



- The usual communication methods can also be a barrier for younger members. We heard that efforts need to be made to meet them where they are (many do not read emails or newsletters - there is just too much stuff). Direct reach-outs are far more effective.
- Surprisingly there were not many comments about the challenges Covid presented (and these were lifted up only by religious educators). Perhaps this suggests that most issues or concerns raised have been in place previous to 2020.
- Quote from one young adult: *“My heart and soul still feel deeply rooted in Unitarianism, my youth there, and I know all those people are still out there. All that love is immense, like amazing. And I think it's probably more than a summer camp kind of love, but I just don't know how to bring it into my life.”*
- Self-organizing possibilities
 - Quote from one young adult: *“YAs could self-organize and craft bids to bring young adult conferences to churches – perhaps with the goal of building capacity with specific congregations? I see a need for more grassroots work from YAs.”*
 - Quote from one young adult: *“Youth cons have a built-in purpose of leadership development, alongside community building and faith development. Two questions: what are the purposes of YA gatherings? And are there ways that the leadership skills that many of us gained through youth cons, goldmine, etc could be put to use in organizing our own space? More self-organization might help foster a greater feeling of ownership of and investment in this community.”*
- Staff transitions and restructuring
 - Casey and Rev. Danie are both leaving their CUC roles over summer 2024, with the likely result of some restructuring of the YaYA ministry positions.
 - Much of the CUC’s future capacity to carry out the recommendations laid out here will depend on where this all lands.

Conclusion

In the attempt to better understand our young adults and think about how to respond to the gaps in our current YA ministry, this report has lifted up some revealing patterns, areas of tension and realizations about this demographic and their relationship with the CUC.

First, there is no doubt that the young adult community is important and precious. Just like caucus spaces for other marginalized groups, YA events provide a space for young people, who are very often not well represented by the dominant UU culture, to be with others who understand their



experiences. This becomes even more important for young adults who are not able to be a part of a congregation, whether that's because there isn't one nearby or this expression of UUism isn't accessible to them for various reasons. Inadvertently, CUC YA programs have become a sort of replacement faith community for many young adults. While this is understandable, it is not a desirable long term goal for several reasons:

- YA community is intended to be temporary, as it is a ministry that is designed to meet people at a specific stage of life. Perhaps the large age range has complicated this.
- YA culture is beautiful and vital and deserves to be shared widely. There are UUs of all ages who would resonate with this expression of UUism.
- The CUC does not have the resources to be a pseudo-congregation for young people, or for anyone. Our mandate is to support Canadian UUism of all kinds, primarily via congregations and communities.
 - That said, there is a place for national programs that allow the most marginalized among us to find each other as our wider movement does the work to become more welcoming.
- By themselves, age-specific programs are not holistic faith formation containers. For this, intergenerational community is necessary.²

Perhaps one of the most important takeaways from this project is that CUC programs alone cannot meet all the spiritual and social needs of young adults.

Another important thread to weave in is the work being done by the Justice & Equity team that is bringing attention to the distinct cultural expressions of UUism that exist in Canada. This was brought to the forefront at the CUCs "[Inclusivity Forum 5: Welcoming People of All Ages](#)" in November 2022. This forum highlighted youth and young adult culture as co-created, prioritizing inclusivity and justice, and often made up of a majority of people who were raised as UUs. In contrast, traditional UU culture can be characterized as being more performance or product centered, tends to privilege familiarity and can be exclusive to those who don't fit the mold. The Inclusivity Fora and YAs & Beyond project both heard from many people outside of the YA age range who spoke of their desire to experience YA-style community. Taking these learnings into consideration, we especially want to lift up the recommendation to experiment with more expansive

² The Fuller Youth Institute's [Sticky Faith report](#) shows that the two most important factors that lead to YAs staying connected to their faith after graduating high school are relationships with community members of different ages and involvement in whole community worship. Additionally, faith development works best when people are able to spend time with those who are a little bit ahead of them on their faith journey.



age ranges for YA gatherings, and create intergenerational communities that are based on a co-created and inclusive culture.

To that end, we suggest:

- Do **not** end all 18-35 year old programming abruptly (our UU history has shown that abrupt endings to programs and services cause more harm than good), but recognize that this age group and our wider movement would both benefit from more crossover.
- Create opportunities for intentional, healthy relationship building across generations.
 - The CUC could explore ways to facilitate mentorship programs directly and/or through congregations.
 - Experiment with events with different age make-ups: for example, young adults and SuperFriends, or YA-hosted events for all ages, or all-ages events that intentionally and skillfully facilitate intergenerational connection.
- Focus on programs to meet the needs of the least represented/resourced: emerging adults and BIPOC YAs.
- It is essential to support congregations, communities and new expressions of UUism in their commitment to deeply welcome and be transformed by young adult participation so that YAs are not reliant on the CUC for their basic social and spiritual needs. Part of this work is to support the development of new expressions of lived UUism spearheaded by young adults and others, alongside the continued nurturing of our congregations.

We envision a world where young adults are fully integrated, valued members of all our congregations and communities. In this reality, the CUC would continue to offer leadership training and networking opportunities relevant to all ages, and young adults' would have their social and spiritual needs primarily met by their local intergenerational communities within a diverse ecosystem of creative UU expressions. The CUC is ready and eager to be partners with you in this joyful work!

Casey Stainsby and Rev. Danie Webber



Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. Email
2. Your Name
3. Age Categories
 - a. 14-19
 - b. 18-24
 - c. 25-35
 - d. 35-50
 - e. 50+
4. Other identities/roles you hold that are relevant:
 - a. Currently involved in CUC YA community
 - b. Not currently involved in CUC YA community
 - c. Youth Advisor
 - d. Religious Educator
 - e. Minister
 - f. SuperFriend
 - g. Parent/Guardian
 - h. Other ...
5. Which of these categories do you feel best describes you (not strictly based on your age, but your life stage)
 - a. I feel like I'm an emerging adult
 - b. I feel like I'm a young adult
 - c. I feel like I'm an adult
 - d. Other ...
6. Can you say more about why you identify with the category you selected in the previous question?
7. What do you see as the unique needs of emerging adults (18-24 year olds)?
8. What are your ideas for how the CUC might better minister to emerging adults, and equip UU communities to better minister to them?
9. What do you see as the unique needs of young adults in their late 20s and early 30s?
10. What are your ideas for how the CUC might better minister to young adults in their late 20s and early 30s, and equip UU communities to better minister to them?
11. What do you see as the unique needs of UUs in their late 30s and 40s?
12. What are your ideas for how the CUC might minister to young adults in their late 30s and 40s, and equip UU communities to better minister to them?



13. If the CUC is going to continue to support your adult age-range with specific community building and faith formation opportunities, what age range do you think makes the most sense? (ie. where would our resources have the most impact towards our goal of building vital multigenerational communities?) What gaps would be left, and how might these be addressed?
14. Creativity time! How can we encourage youth and young adult community values to be spread into the wider UU movement so that bridging out of youth and young adults is not such a shock?
15. Have we missed anything? Anything else you'd like to add?



Appendix 2: Email Template Questions

Hi (name),
I hope you're doing well!

I'm reaching out to you specifically because I would love your input on an important conversation that's going on about/with the CUC young adult community.

We're talking about the YA age range, but it's more than that. Currently we offer programs and events both online and in person for UU YAs ages 18-35. We recognize that this is a big age range, and might need to be shifted. We have also recognized that many people who grew up UU are not engaged or participating in our offerings. You are part of the group we have identified as not participating and we would love to hear from you.

Is there any way in which participation in Unitarian Universalist community would be more accessible to you?

Would you be up for sharing some of your thoughts on this?

There are a few different options...

- you could just reply to this email
- you could fill out [this survey](#)
- you could attend a live zoom conversation with me, Casey, and other young adults who are not actively connected to our programming

For the last one, we're hoping to have it in the next couple weeks, and we've put together this [When2meet poll](#) to find the best time for the most people. So please fill it out if you'd like to join!

Here's some more info about the whole [YAs & Beyond Conversations](#).

Thanks so much for considering this invitation. And don't forget you're welcome to reach out anytime for more UU connection, or just to chat!

We miss you! (not in a "you should feel guilty" way, in a "you're always welcome back and we'll be thrilled to see you" kinda way)

much love and appreciation,
Rev Danielle (and Casey)



Appendix 3: Theme Identification Mapping

