

Passing the baton

HELPING CONGREGATIONS REFLECT ON EFFECTIVELY RETAINING, REACHING AND RELEASING YOUNG ADULTS

Presbyterian
CHURCH IN IRELAND

Introduction: the challenge and opportunity

Leaving the bubble of teenage years behind means young adults are confronted with making real decisions, each packed with moments that have the potential to cause faith to fly or falter. In these transitions, it is easy for many to lose confidence in their faith, making them the most likely to leave church and not return. It is right to acknowledge we have a missing generation.

With such a wide variety of congregational circumstances, we need different ministry approaches when it comes to working with young adults. Some congregations offer programmes specifically aimed at this age group, while others aim to make all they do accessible to them. Some use programmes to reach young adults, while others focus on training and equipping. Some have the blessing of large numbers of young adults, but the challenge of drawing them into congregational life. Others work with small numbers of young adults, but the blessing of having them fully integrated into congregational life. Some congregations lose most young people at the age of 18 as they go elsewhere for university education or job opportunities, while others are in locations where they have an influx of students or young adults looking for a church where they work.

At a stage of life where world views are shaped, career paths are started and foundational decisions are made, there is a huge opportunity to influence and disciple those emerging into adulthood. ***Young adults have so much to offer the church in terms of energy, life, gifting, perspective and leadership. They may well be the leaders of tomorrow, but they are also the church of today.*** Our challenge is to effectively pass the baton of faith to this upcoming generation.

THE FIRST DECADE OF ADULTHOOD CONTAINS SOME OF LIFE'S MOST SIGNIFICANT TRANSITIONS.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource aims to help kirk sessions or young adults' ministry leaders within congregations to evaluate their current practices of young adults' ministry.
It is designed to lead you through a discussion together and is divided into the following parts:

PART 1:

Existing models of young adults' ministry

This section explores four different models of young adults' ministry.

While no model will fit perfectly and some congregations may be a mix of the approaches, this section summarises various positives, dangers and corrections. This section will be most profitable if it is pre-circulated to be read ahead of a meeting or if the four models are introduced before discussion to set it up. There is an accompanying PowerPoint presentation to help.

PART 2:

Reflecting on your current practice

In this section, questions are provided to help you reflect on how you currently engage with young adults in your congregation.

These are to be used as part of a discussion, either in kirk session or with those who have responsibility or involvement in your young adults' ministry. Short video clips are also available to watch from three congregations sharing about their approach to young adults' ministry. The goal of highlighting these examples is not to encourage you to copy their approaches but to highlight the principles that guide their work. Show the videos that best reflect your congregational context and discuss together your reflections.

PART 3:

Top tips for young adults' ministry

The resource finishes by offering some top tips to help you consider what practical steps you could take to develop and invest in young adults' ministry.

OUR CHALLENGE IS TO EFFECTIVELY PASS THE BATON OF FAITH TO THIS UPCOMING GENERATION

PART 1:

Existing models of young adults' ministry

Congregations may approach young adults' ministry, either intentionally or by default, in some of the following ways. There are positives in each model as well as downsides that might require some attention or correction.

1/ EXTENSION

This approach focuses on extending youth ministry for older teenagers or young adults who are located somewhere between ongoing participants in a youth group and being ready to lead. The aim is to keep these young adults engaged for now while they can still relate to the programme. While this approach isn't ideal in the long run, it may be how many congregations find themselves approaching young adults' ministry as their starting point.

Positives

- Maintains connection with young people who are leaving youth ministry.
- Might help to keep them involved in the life of the church.

Downsides

- Perpetuates a need for age-specific ministry rather than promoting full engagement in the wider church.
- The teaching received and service offered will not specifically address the issues of the young adult phase of life and therefore may not stretch them to mature in their faith.
- May not be helpful in the long term if it continues to treat young adults as consumers of a programme they may have outgrown, rather than contributors to it.

Corrections

- Add specific mentoring or leadership development opportunities.
- Gather the young adults together occasionally for something age-specific.
- Other church programmes consider how to be more intentionally inclusive of, or accessible to, young adults.

2/ INVOLVEMENT

This approach focuses on involving young adults in church-based activities, by getting them to help out or serve with various ministries and programmes in the life of the church. In many congregations, young adults are being channelled into roles of service, and sometimes leadership, within youth ministry. Often these opportunities arise due to gaps that emerge within the leadership teams of existing ministries. The expectation is that their involvement will keep them engaged in church life. However, a sole focus on service can lead to a neglect of genuine discipleship development.

Positives

- Gets young adults serving in the life of the congregation.
- Helps them connect to the bigger picture of church.
- Some young adults may grow spiritually as they serve.

Downsides

- Some young adults are ill-equipped, unsuited or not passionate about roles they are in.
- Some serve for a short time out of duty, but with the busyness of serving don't grasp opportunities to grow.

Corrections

- Offer specific opportunities of investment and equipping for the young adults as they serve.
- Connect the young adults to role models and mentors who will help them grow.
- Where appropriate, allow the young adults a say in how ministry is shaped and delivered within the congregation.

3/ AGE-SPECIFIC

This approach focuses on creating specific and targeted programmes for the young adult age range. Some congregations have been able to develop a separate grouping or ministry specifically for young adults.
The age groupings vary from 18-25 to 20-39. The formats vary from monthly gatherings, to specific small groups, to an organising group who create termly opportunities.

Positives

- Attractive to young adults due to the nature of a group who are all at a similar age and stage.
- Age-specific teaching is possible and issues relevant to their stage of life can be addressed.
- Often a greater depth of relationship and fellowship are possible, helping contribute to discipleship growth.

Downsides

- Can feed a consumer mindset among young adults.
- Can create a 'silo' mentality that takes young adults out of the heart of congregational life and places them off to the side instead.
- Can aim to keep young adults happy, rather than deal with the complexities of clashing or competing styles in other parts of the congregation.
- Long-term trajectory can lead to intergenerational breakdown and loss of relationship.

Corrections

- Get young adults to serve and lead within the group.
- Identify specific opportunities in the life of the congregation or community for the group to serve, or in which to participate together.
- Introduce intergenerational balance by bringing older members of the congregation into the group periodically to serve food, share with or speak to the young adults.

4/ INTEGRATION

This approach focuses on integrating young adults into all aspects of ministry in the life of the congregation. This model develops environments in church where young adults are equipped and released, belong in relationship and are given support to find a mature expression of their contribution to the body of Christ. For some congregations this still may involve age-specific aspects at times, but these activities are located as part of a bigger picture of intergenerational life. It may take a long time to get to this place, often requiring a journey through some of the models above to see this happen.

Positives

- Care has been taken to explore and expand the accessibility of the congregation's teaching, worship and community so that young adults feel included.
- Young adults are serving within the church, while also learning through involvement with other ministries in the life of the congregation e.g. small groups.
- Young adults are making a valuable contribution to shaping the way things are happening in the life of the congregation by leading organisations, contributing to committees and serving on teams within church.

Downsides

- For many young adults, this might be their first experience of leadership and therefore they will require a lot of initial support and may make mistakes along the way.
- Some young adults are reluctant to step into serving or leadership roles, perhaps due to a lack of confidence or, in some cases, a reluctance to overly commit themselves.

Corrections

- Provide focused support, training or mentoring to young adults stepping into leadership for the first time, both on a practical and spiritual basis.
- Be specific about the nature and length of commitment you are looking for. Young adults may respond better to an initial shorter-term commitment. Also be clear about the commitment that is needed to serve well in the role.

PART 2:

Reflecting on your current practice

Having read the four models of young adults' ministry, now it is time to reflect on your own congregation's practice.

This part is best done in discussion with others, either as part of a kirk session meeting or with those who have responsibility for, or involvement in, your young adults' ministry.

The following questions are provided to help you reflect on how you currently engage young adults in your congregation.

DISCUSS

1/ What are you already doing in your congregation to support, encourage or reach young adults?

2/ What are some of the gaps that you perceive in how you are working with young adults?

3/ Having read the four models, which one do you think best matches your congregation's approach to young adults' ministry?

4/ Discuss the positives, dangers and corrections of the model closest to your current approach.

5/ Which model of young adults' ministry would you like to move closer towards in your approach?

WATCH

Take time to watch some of the accompanying videos found here: *www.presbyterianireland.org/passingthebaton*

Reflect on the principles and practices that you see before taking time to discuss the following questions:

1/ What principles did you notice that are key for ministry to young adults?

2/ What struck you as good practice that you could develop in your own context?



Trinity Presbyterian, Greyabbey

Involving and equipping young adults to serve and lead.



Union Road Presbyterian, Magherafelt

Intentional investment for a unique age and stage.



Whiteabbey Presbyterian, north Belfast

Playing a full part in an all-age congregation.

REMEMBER, THE AIM OF THESE VIDEOS IS TO SHARE GOOD PRACTICE AND PRINCIPLES, WITHOUT SUGGESTING THAT EVERYTHING SHOULD BE COPIED.

PART 3:

Top tips for young adults' ministry

1/ RELATIONSHIP AND EXAMPLE

Words like mentoring, relationship and example featured heavily in our conversations.

- Create opportunities where young adults can gather together for food and develop relationships with one another.
- Keep in touch with young adults who are away at university by contacting them, praying for them and meeting up with them when they are home.
- Pair up young adults with older Christians in the church for intentional or informal mentoring.
- Invite a younger couple or a small group of young adults from your church around to your home for a meal together.

2/ BELONGING TO THE CHURCH FAMILY

There was a sense that the young adults best connected to the wider church family were those who stuck around long term.

- Create opportunities where young adults can serve alongside older members in the church.
- Aim to speak to a young adult every Sunday before worship or at coffee time, even choosing to sit in different seats to facilitate this.
- Give the names of young people in the congregation to specific groups e.g. Session or PW members, asking them to pray for them by name.
- Interview and hear stories from young adults within church services to encourage them, as well as to better understand the challenges of following Jesus in their world.
- Encourage and give space for young adults to discover and use their gifts more within your congregation.

3/ FOUNDATIONAL TRUTH IS VITAL

It is vital to provide more than social opportunities for young adults and engage them in things of spiritual depth.

- Invite some young adults to come along to your small group to encourage them to engage in Bible study.
- Run a short series focused on real-life issues for young adults e.g. 'Faith at Work' or 'Fruitfulness on the Frontline' (London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, www.licc.org.uk).
- Offer to meet up with a young adult in your congregation to read the Bible and pray together on a monthly basis. PCI's Proximity resources provide an excellent starting point for this approach.

4/ RELEASE THEM TO SERVE AND LEAD

Some young adults are frustrated by the lack of opportunities to shape and lead things within the life of their congregations. Allow them influence and not just involvement.

- Offer training nights on developing into leadership, teaching the Bible or leading small groups.
- Invite the inputs and perspectives of some young adults at your next Session meeting.
- Consider which young adults in your congregation you can invite into a leadership role. Try to support them in their roles through training, encouragement and advice.

5/ EFFECTIVE MISSION TO YOUNG ADULTS HAPPENS BY YOUNG ADULTS

Young adults are often connected to a huge network of people through study, work, leisure or social media. The best placed people to reach young adults are young adults themselves. The more young adults can be involved in, the more they will own.

- As you develop young adult focused initiatives, bring together a steering group of young adults who can plan and shape them.
- Challenge your young adults to run a mission project, such as Alpha or Christianity Explored. Offer to help them with the planning and logistics, but encourage them to take charge of the delivery and running of it.

YOUNG ADULTS HAVE SO MUCH TO OFFER THE CHURCH IN TERMS OF ENERGY, LIFE, GIFTING, PERSPECTIVE AND LEADERSHIP. THEY MAY WELL BE THE LEADERS OF TOMORROW, BUT THEY ARE ALSO THE CHURCH OF TODAY.



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Presbyterian
CHURCH IN IRELAND

Assembly Buildings, 2-10 Fisherwick Place, Belfast BT1 6DW
Tel: +44 (0)28 9032 2284 **Email:** info@presbyterianireland.org

www.presbyterianireland.org

Registered Charity in Northern Ireland (NIC104483) | Registered Charity in the Republic of Ireland (20015695)