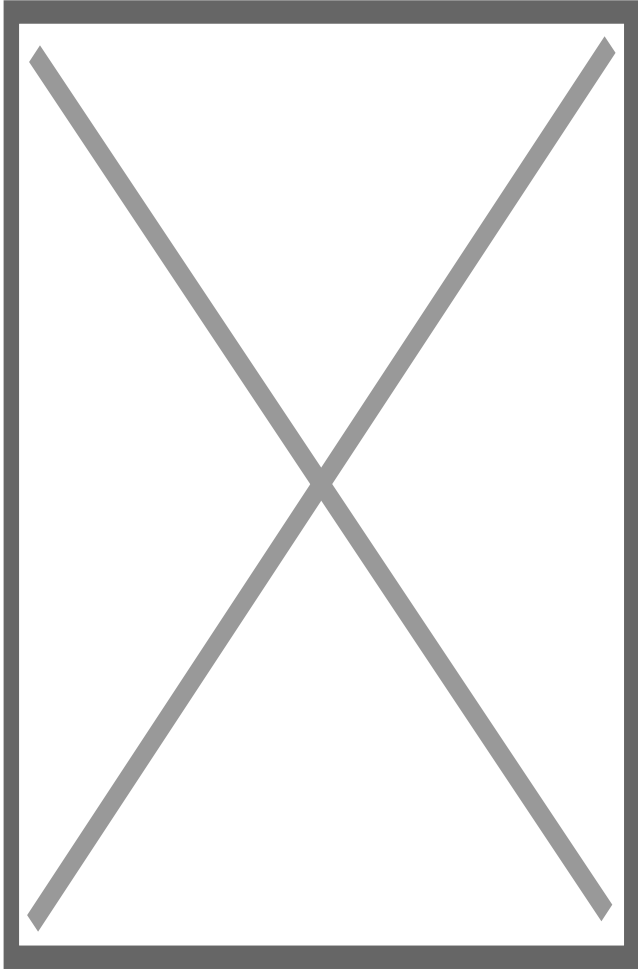


What do people in their 20s want from church?

Churches try all kinds of tricks. But new research indicates that the answers are surprisingly traditional.

by [E. Suzanne Wille](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

In Review



Defiant Hope, Active Love

What Young Adults are Seeking in Places of Work, Faith, and Community

Edited by Jeffrey F. Keuss

Eerdmans

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During the first decade of this century, churches obsessed over a simple question: How can we attract millennials? News about declining church attendance was everywhere, and as the largest generational cohort after the boomers, millennials were every leader's goal. Churches made their services seeker-friendly. Nondenominational churches embraced more traditional liturgy, because young people seemed attracted to mystery. Mainline churches tried jazzing up their staid rites, hoping to appeal. Everyone treated this generation like foreign creatures to be studied.

This trend led Jeffrey Keuss, professor of Christian ministry, theology, and culture at Seattle Pacific University, to research young adults and their needs and desires for community. A grant from the Lilly Endowment funded the Pivot NW Research group, which employed theologians and industrial-organizational psychologists to study young adults age 23 to 29.

Defiant Hope, Active Love, edited by Keuss, captures their work. Each chapter explores a theme that arose during research, such as seeing the 20s as a distinct developmental stage, imagining the church as a "resource station" for young adults rather than as a final destination, and identifying young adults as the leaders they already are. Keuss bookends each essay with an introduction and conclusion, providing theological reflection. Each chapter could be a stand-alone essay, though reading them together clarifies the findings.

The book makes it clear that today's young people live in a new social and economic reality. They wait longer to marry, have children, buy a house, and complete other traditionally accepted markers of adulthood. Researchers recognize emerging adulthood as a new developmental phase, a long period of transition which may make those in their 20s less able to commit to long-term church membership. While shaking hands with newcomers after church, a pastor's gaze often slides past young people, landing on couples with children who could become stable members of the community. But young people need churches that value them in their transition, even if they cannot stay for the long haul. If we can't be with young adults in their changing lives, these authors emphasize, we won't have much to offer them.

Even amid transitions, young adults seek community and connection. In fact, community is one of the things they most long for—and not just with other young people. People in their 20s long for intergenerational connection and mentoring relationships. The authors also recommend "reverse mentoring," with young adults as the guides. If churches provide connection for young adults, they might be ready to consider themselves resource stations rather than final destinations, offering a place for emerging adults to be formed as disciples even if they don't stay there long term. The authors encourage churches to create on and off ramps for young people as they enter and leave the community, as well as rituals to mark life transitions.

When asked what values they seek in community organizations, young adults respond with many—purpose, fun, networking, spiritual growth, social transformation, and peace among them. Some of these can be fulfilled outside a religious context, but the last three are particularly conducive to a church setting. Churches can meet these values in innovative, powerful ways. After the murder of George Floyd, for example, one young adult group created an outdoor prayer labyrinth in the church parking lot, providing spiritual growth, peace, and social transformation together.

Despite years of churches trying all kinds of tricks, when these researchers examined what helped emerging adults grow spiritually, the answers they found were surprisingly traditional. They found scripture, prayer, worship, and communion most helpful, the plain but nourishing fare of the church for 2,000 years.

The book also finds that young adults seek not spiritual ease but spiritual engagement. They want to engage authentically with others at church, have real conversations, and serve as leaders. This last desire challenges the traditions of many churches, where people move up the rungs of the hierarchy, perhaps "waiting their turn"

before leading a ministry or overseeing finances. Yet young people often have big jobs with lots of responsibility; it is infantilizing to treat them as junior members who need to grow into leadership. The authors recommend an approach of identifying rather than developing leaders, providing mentorship and not micromanagement.

Many of these ideas match the experiences of those of us lucky enough to have young adults in our congregation. The urban parish I pastor welcomes many newcomers in their 20s and now has a sizable number of emerging adults as members. I know the heartbreak of engaging young people only to watch them leave because of volatile employment or the cost of living. But we now have a robust tradition of leave-taking prayers during the Sunday service, blessing people as they go. Harder, at times, is incorporating young adults into leadership. Young adults' busy, changing lives make it hard for them to commit as much time as older people, and they might leave just as they are becoming leaders. I've found that allowing young adults to lead may be messy and vulnerable, but it is the way we enter into authentic relationships.

For those of us who work closely with young people in a church setting, there are no startling revelations here, just solid observations and recommendations. There's a slightly awkward fit between theological insights and social science methods, and at times I wondered who the authors imagined reading and using this information. Still, this research has confirmed my experience and inspired me to think about better implementing its insights: how to encourage intergenerational groups and mentoring, identify more young adult leaders in our church, and engage emerging leaders more deeply in spiritual practices.

The observations in this book may also help church leaders to move on from treating younger generations as exotic. *Defiant Hope, Active Love* encourages connection with young adults, engaging them in deep spiritual practices and leadership of the church, rather than trying to figure out splashy ways to attract them. We are encouraged to invest in them and love them for as long as we have them at our church.

The book opens with the image of a petrified forest in the Northwest. The trees appear alive from afar, but they have turned to stone due to mineralized groundwater. Keuss warns us that young people come to the ancient institution of the church yearning for a living faith, not a dead tradition. Many emerging adults experience "deep poverty," both economic and spiritual. A congregation with living faith can respond by practicing active love and creating communities of "loving defiance," so that young adults—and all—can live the shalom, the dream of God, where together we live lives of justice and righteousness, steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. But to offer that to young adults, we've got to live that way now.