

# **Growing Young: Six Core Commitments of Churches Effectively Engaging Young People**

New Research from the Fuller Youth Institute

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## **Abstract**

The Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) has completed a study of over 250 evangelical, mainline, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and non-denominational congregations, with the goal of understanding how and why exemplary churches are effectively engaging teenagers and emerging adults ages 15-29. The multi-stage project consisted of quantitative and qualitative online surveys, structured phone interviews, and ethnographic research methods. Findings suggest that effective churches consistently share six core commitments that are contextually embodied in the overall congregational culture. These churches are “growing young” as the young people infuse the whole church with energy, vitality, innovation, and service. This paper details the team’s research journey, profiles high-level insights for both congregations and educators, and invites feedback on the theoretical framework.

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## **Introduction**

The findings presented in the book *Growing Young* emerged from the Churches Engaging Young People (CEYP, pronounced “keep”) Project, conducted from 2012-2015 by the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) at Fuller Theological Seminary. The goal of the project was to understand how and why exemplary churches are effectively engaging teenagers and emerging adults.

The project’s goal was accomplished through research beginning with a nomination process that identified churches that were perceived to be exemplary. FYI then studied these congregations in three stages of research. The first stage consisted of quantitative and qualitative online surveys of pastors and youth/young adult leaders, followed by a second stage of structured quantitative and qualitative phone interviews with church leaders and parishioners, and concluded with a third stage of church site visits that utilized ethnographic research methods.<sup>1</sup>

## **Formation of research questions and goals**

Beginning in 2004, FYI launched the College Transition Project (CTP),<sup>2</sup> a longitudinal study that sought to understand what programmatic and relational characteristics of high school youth ministries and churches have a demonstrable relationship to how students make spiritual and religious transitions to life after high school. This research resulted in a collection of resources and training materials known as *Sticky Faith*. While the research shed light on many questions related to the faith of young people, it raised further questions about the systemic implications for the whole church.

The CEYP Project’s core research team of Dr. Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin began to explore the possibility of studying whole church systems to discover why some succeed in their ministry to young people and others seem to struggle. A thorough literature review of over 80 academic articles and popular and academic books on the topics of church health, church leadership, youth ministry, and related fields were reviewed. In addition, exploratory interviews

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<sup>1</sup> For more project-related materials, including the survey instruments and scales, interview protocols, and additional research documents, please visit [ChurchesGrowingYoung.org](http://ChurchesGrowingYoung.org).

<sup>2</sup> The College Transition Project began with a pilot phase in 2004 and two subsequent longitudinal studies launched in 2006 and 2007, extending seven years total and including two additional qualitative studies. See Kara Eckmann Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

were conducted with church leaders and scholars in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities for additional research.

After conducting the literature review and exploratory interviews, the team confirmed a need for research that would incorporate all of the following factors into one study: including 15-29-year-olds<sup>3</sup> as participants, taking a hopeful posture by focusing on congregations that are excelling, examining the relationship between the youth/young adult ministry and the entire congregation, blending social sciences with theology and contextualization, and understanding the process of change that congregations undergo in order to begin engaging young people.

Based on this preliminary work, the research team identified one primary question and two secondary questions for study.

- Primary research question: *What congregational practices lead to effective engagement of young people?*
- Secondary research questions: *How does engaging young people contribute to a thriving church? What are next step processes for congregations that want to enact changes toward more effective ministry with young people?*

In order to obtain the necessary expertise to answer these questions appropriately, the core research team recruited several advisors to guide the process. Members of these groups reviewed the CEYP Project's initial research design and provided ongoing support and oversight throughout the life of the project.

- *Senior Research Advisors:* Made up of four faculty members from Fuller Seminary (Chap Clark, Scott Cormode, Jim Furrow, and Cameron Lee), this group provided monthly (and often weekly) consultation and feedback. Together, they offered expertise in the areas of congregational studies and leadership, youth development and culture, parenting and family relationships, spiritual formation, and instrument development and general research design.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this study, the project defined young people as ages 15-29. The research team believes this represents the age group most identified as being absent from the church, and it builds on the theoretical work of emerging adulthood pioneered by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

- *Expert Advisory Council*: Consisting of sixteen scholars and practitioners in the areas of youth ministry and church health,<sup>4</sup> this group contributed to the design of the research methods, developed and revised research instruments, provided feedback on the goals and progress of the project during a 3-day in-person Research Summit, and reviewed each stage of research findings.
- *Pastor Advisory Council*: Made up of ten pastoral leaders,<sup>5</sup> they assisted in the interpretation and application of the research findings, ensuring that the process was connected to the needs and interests of church leaders.

At various points, we consulted with an additional 21 Fuller faculty whose various fields of scholarship informed our research design. Early in the project, a working definition was formed to clarify *effectively engaging young people*. The research team wanted to avoid an overly specific definition that would exclude important non-traditional or otherwise varied forms of effectiveness. As a result, an effective church was defined as one that is *involving and retaining young people in the congregational community, as well as helping them develop a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ*. While *involving* and *retaining* were much easier to operationalize, the team employed a variety of methods to understand and measure a *vibrant faith in Jesus Christ*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Expert Advisory Council members included: Steve Argue, Fuller Theological Seminary, Andy Crouch, Christianity Today, Kenda Creasy Dean, Princeton Seminary, Mark DeVries, Ministry Architects, Reggie Joiner, Orange and reThink Group, David Kinnaman, Barna Research Group, Pamela King, Fuller Theological Seminary, Terry Linhart, Bethel College, Brad Lomenick, Blinc Consulting, Bob McCarty, National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, Amy McEntee, National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association, Soong-Chan Rah, North Park Theological Seminary, Dave Rahn, Youth for Christ, Tyler Reagin, Catalyst, Andy Root, Luther Seminary, and Virginia Ward, Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Thanks to grant funding, advisors were given stipends for their time invested in the project.

<sup>5</sup> Pastor Advisory Council members include Eugene Cho, Quest Covenant Church, Q Cafe, One Day's Wages, WA, Sergio De La Mora, Cornerstone Church, CA, Erwin Raphael McManus, Mosaic Church, CA, Brenda Salter McNeil, Quest Covenant Church and Seattle Pacific University School of Theology, WA, Carey Nieuwhof, Connexus Church, Ontario, Canada, Perry Noble, NewSpring Church, SC, John Ortberg, Menlo Church, CA, Efreem Smith, World Impact, CA, Jill VerSteeg, Meredith Drive Reformed Church, IA, and Len Wenke, Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati, OH. Thanks to grant funding, advisors were given stipends for their time invested in the project.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in the Stage One survey, church leaders were asked to think of a young person with vibrant faith in Jesus Christ and then describe 3-5 characteristics of what that young person's faith looks like. The leader then rated (based on that description) what percentage of the young people in their church have a vibrant faith. A youth leader was also asked to select the percentage of young people in the congregation that participated in particular faith practices or actions believed to correlate with mature faith. In Stage Two interviews, participants were asked to rate how true particular statements were of their congregation, such as "my congregation effectively equips people to grow as followers of Jesus Christ." Young people themselves were asked to rate how true particular statements were that might describe their own faith practices. These statements comprised a nine-item scale utilizing significantly

Building on a review of the existing literature, the research team also developed an initial working list (prior to beginning Stage One research) of characteristics that seemed likely to be present in churches that are effectively engaging young people. These characteristics were submitted to the Senior Research Advisors and Expert Advisory Council for review, resulting in the following list of eight characteristics that provided an early basis for the study. These included, in no particular order:

- Emphasis on engaging in social justice and service in the local community and broader world
- Cultivation of a sense of authentic community that emphasizes both peer and intergenerational relationships
- Parents are active and treated as partners in the discipleship of children and teenagers
- Strategic and developmentally appropriate approach to spiritual formation/discipleship
- Leadership structure and culture that is capable, transparent, and highly participatory
- Intentional engagement with the wider culture (and at times even heated cultural issues) with a focus on Christ's redemption and restoration
- Communication of the gospel as an overarching Scriptural narrative, centered on trusting in redemption through Jesus and participation in God's kingdom work and community
- Corporate worship that is engaging, participatory, and intentionally intergenerational

Both quantitative and qualitative items were developed to explore, assess, and revise these characteristics across the three stages of the research.

### **Nomination process**

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modified items from the Faith Maturity Scale popularized by the Search Institute. See Peter Benson, Michael J. Donahue, and Joseph A. Erickson. "The Faith Maturity Scale: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Empirical Validation." *Social Scientific Study of Religion*, vol 5, p 1-26. JAI Press Inc., 1995. Finally, during Stage Three site visits, the research team assessed vibrant faith through observation and asking interview and focus group participants for their perspective on the spiritual vibrancy of the church. While none of these measures alone were comprehensive or gave the team a full picture, they provided a sufficient understanding to accomplish the goals of this project.

In order to understand how and why churches are effectively engaging young people, it was critically important to first identify churches that fit this description.<sup>7</sup> Nominators were invited to submit names of up to fifteen noteworthy churches via an online questionnaire from June through November 2013.<sup>8</sup> Working largely through Fuller Seminary’s network of churches and Christian ministries, we solicited names of vibrant congregations from over 35 nominators who fell into three categories:

*National denominational leaders* from 13 Protestant denominations<sup>9</sup> as well as the Roman Catholic Church and Greek Orthodox Church.

*Respected scholars* from seven educational institutions: Fuller Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, Wheaton College, North Park University, Gordon College, Trinity Evangelical Deerfield School, and Luther Seminary.

*Other experts in ministry to young people outside of specific denominational channels* including the Willow Creek Association, Orange, the Youth Cartel, Catalyst, and our own Fuller Youth Institute team.<sup>10</sup>

Requirements included that churches be located within the United States, and the pastors be able to complete a survey and potential subsequent surveys or interviews in English. The nominations were based upon the following criteria:

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<sup>7</sup> While multiple scholarly works formed the basis for the research design, the research team found Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), and Pamela Ebstyn King, C. E. Clardy, and J. S. Ramos, “Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 29 no. 2 (2014): 186-212, to be particularly helpful in the development of an exemplar methodology. The work of several Sociologists of Religion, including Nancy Ammerman, Christian Smith, and Robert Wuthnow were also invaluable to the overall research design. The research team sought direct consultation from Dr. Smith.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to submitting names of fifteen noteworthy churches, nominators were also invited to submit the names of up to ten churches that are “more typical in their engagement of young people.” This group of more typical churches was not central to the project’s exemplar methodology, but was pursued as a matched comparison sample in order to examine if any significant differences would be found between the more typical and noteworthy churches.

<sup>9</sup> The 13 Protestant denominations are the: Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian Church USA, Evangelical Covenant Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church, Church of the Nazarene, American Baptist Churches USA, Church of God in Christ, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Episcopal Church, Christian Reformed Church, and Christian and Missionary Alliance.

<sup>10</sup> Most of the nominations from the Fuller Youth Institute were congregations that have participated in our yearlong Sticky Faith Cohort training program.

- Churches that are effectively engaging a growing number of young people<sup>11</sup> (ages 15-29); or are effectively engaging a large number of young people in relation to the size of the congregation. (Up to ten churches per nominator.)
- Churches that seem to have something *exciting* or *missional* going on with young people, but their numbers aren't large or growing. (Up to five churches per nominator.)

Nominators provided basic demographic information about each congregation, as well as a brief explanation of why the congregation was being nominated.<sup>12</sup>

Based on this nomination process, names of 363 noteworthy congregations were submitted for study.

## **Stage One research**

### *Overview and instruments*

A pastor and youth/young adult leader (either paid or volunteer) from each church were contacted by the research team via email and/or phone beginning in November 2013 and invited to participate in the study. Participating leaders completed a quantitative and qualitative survey that was delivered through an online questionnaire. Participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses, and were offered a \$50 gift card for their involvement.

The Stage One surveys included questions about the church's size, attendance, growth patterns and presence of young people, socioeconomics, ethnic diversity, and the leader's definition of spiritual vibrancy (and evidence of vibrancy among young people). In addition, a scale was developed to rate the presence of the eight congregational characteristics predicted to be associated with effective engagement of young people,<sup>13</sup> as well as a scale gauging the faith

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<sup>11</sup> Nominators were provided with the project's working definition of effectiveness, stated above.

<sup>12</sup> While designing this nomination process, the research team considered providing more specific criteria. However, after much discussion the decision was made to leave the criteria somewhat open to the interpretation of the nominator. This allowed the team to identify and learn from a wide variety of churches that the expert nominators believed to be noteworthy, including those that might not fit the initial expectations of what the research team thought it meant for a church to be effective. This resulted in nominated churches that were *perceived as effective* in their engagement of young people.

<sup>13</sup> For example, one question in this scale was, "How intentional is your congregation in planning activities that cultivate relationships where peers can share honestly with each other?"

maturity of young people in the congregation.<sup>14</sup> Open-ended questions invited leaders to describe characteristics they believe account for their church’s success with engaging young people, challenges they face when it comes to ministering to young people, and ways they have seen young people contribute to the health or growth of their congregation. Slightly different versions of the survey were administered to the pastors and youth/young adult leaders. In particular, the faith maturity measure was excluded from the senior pastor survey, assuming the pastor may have less awareness of young people’s spiritual maturity.<sup>15</sup>

The survey, designed by the Fuller Youth Institute’s core research team, was subjected to several rounds of review by the Senior Research Advisors and Expert Advisory Council, as well as pilot testing, before being approved by Fuller’s Institutional Review Board (Human Subjects Review Committee), designed online, and sent to participants.

### *Participants*

Stage One data collection concluded in February 2014. A total of 373 church leaders from 259 nominated noteworthy congregations participated.

Over 21 denominations were represented among the responding churches, in addition to 43 congregations indicating no denominational affiliation. The largest five specific traditions represented were Baptist (32 churches), Presbyterian (32), United Methodist (26), Evangelical Covenant (17), and Roman Catholic (15). Churches ranged in size from under 100 participants to over 10,000 participants,<sup>16</sup> the largest three categories being 1,001-3,000 (28 percent), 501-1,000 (24 percent), and 251-500 (15 percent). They ranged geographically across all census regions of the US, with the heaviest representations from the Midwest (33 percent), West (31 percent), and South (25 percent). In terms of ethnic diversity (based on reporting churches), 56 percent of churches identified as “mostly White” (meaning over 80 percent of church participants), 31 percent were multiracial (meaning the congregation included at least 20 percent or more from two different ethnic/racial groups), 8 percent were “mostly African American,” 2 percent were

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<sup>14</sup> For example, “What percentage of the young people in your congregation take time to read and study the Bible?”

<sup>15</sup> To view the survey instruments used in each stage of the research, please visit [churchesgrowingyoung.org](http://churchesgrowingyoung.org).

<sup>16</sup> Leaders were asked to define church size based on *participants during an average week*, rather than based on *members*.



“mostly Asian,” and 3 percent were “mostly Hispanic/Latino.”<sup>17</sup> As for socioeconomic diversity (as described by reporting churches), 7 percent indicated they were primarily upper class congregations, 41 percent primarily upper-middle class, 41 percent primarily middle class, 8 percent primarily lower-middle, and 3 percent primarily lower-class. Regarding the type of community in which the congregation was located, (based on reporting churches) 56 percent of the churches reported being suburban, 33 percent urban, 3 percent rural, and 8 percent a mix of urban, suburban, and rural that was difficult to distinguish.

### *Data analysis*

Dr. Cameron Lee and Dr. James Furrow, both faculty members in Fuller Seminary’s School of Psychology, oversaw analysis of Stage One data. Two doctoral students utilized thematic analysis to code responses to the qualitative questions.<sup>18</sup> Analysis of the quantitative data was conducted utilizing statistical analysis software. First, initial correlations were run between the eight church characteristics and church leader’s ratings of spiritual vibrancy, faith maturity, attendance rates and involvement of young people, and other demographic data. Additional regression analyses were performed in order to better understand how particular variables interacted.

These analyses revealed significant correlations between the eight characteristics and identified measures of effectiveness, affirming that these characteristics identified in the literature indeed had some level of importance for congregations’ engagement of young people. Further, based on analysis of the open-ended responses, a ninth characteristic was added, titled, “Making it a priority to focus on young people and their interests.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The number of “mostly Asian” and “mostly Hispanic/Latino” churches nominated for the project was lower than desired, as was the number of Asian and Hispanic/Latino advisors. While the core research team was intentional to invite several such nominators and advisors, a high percentage chose not to participate. Upon further reflection and discussion, the team realized that existing relational networks and the method for soliciting nominations (primarily by email) contributed to the low response. The team took additional steps in later stages of the project to hear from Asian and Hispanic/Latino voices, both as participants and advisors.

<sup>18</sup> For coding method, the project was informed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2006), 77-101.

<sup>19</sup> While the research team had understood this prioritization of young people to be important from the beginning of the study, it was assumed that most churches that were effective incorporated this naturally as part of their ministry. However, the team was surprised when 48.3% of respondents named it as an independent and intentional item when asked “What do you believe are three characteristics about your church that account for your success at engaging young people?”

The findings from this stage of research were reported to the CEYP Project’s advisors, over 100 church leaders at FYI’s Sticky Faith Cohort,<sup>20</sup> and the fall 2014 gathering of the Association of Youth Ministry Educators for additional feedback. This feedback both shaped the interpretation of the results and identified areas for deeper analysis and exploration.<sup>21</sup>

## **Stage Two research**

### *Overview, selection process and instruments*

Based upon the results of the analyses in Stage One, the research team identified several questions for further exploration in Stage Two. This research began in April 2014, consisting of one-hour interviews with 535 young people, parents of teenagers and emerging adults, church staff, and youth/young adult ministry volunteers across 41 exemplary churches selected from the 259 congregations that participated in Stage One (up to 20 interviews were conducted per church). The 41 exemplary congregations that participated in Stage Two were selected through the following process:

- **Group One:** 15 churches were selected that had the highest combined score based on the percentage of young people participating (total number of 15-29 year-olds divided by total number of people participating in the church) and faith maturity ratings of young people. A formula was created that gave equal weight to each of these two criteria, and then the top 15 churches were selected for inclusion in Stage Two.

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<sup>20</sup> Sticky Faith Cohorts are learning communities of churches (hosted by the Fuller Youth Institute) that participate in a yearlong process involving review of the College Transition Project research findings and discussion of their implications in specific church contexts. This includes a church/youth ministry assessment, monthly online webinars, two three-day summits in Pasadena, California, a strategic plan for implementing change, and customized coaching.

<sup>21</sup> In addition to these analyses, the research team sought to compare the nominated noteworthy churches to the responses of 102 church leaders from 76 more typical churches, utilizing measures of faith maturity, vibrancy, and presence of the eight characteristics. Based upon these measures, the team did not find significant statistical differences between the two groups. Further analysis revealed that most of the nominated “typical” churches did in fact also have an effective ministry to teenagers and emerging adults, reporting participation rates of young people that were higher than the national average and not significantly lower than the nominated exemplars. Upon further reflection, the team concluded the way the submission criteria for “more typical” churches was phrased did not have the intended effect of producing a group of average or poorly performing churches. In addition, the placement of this question in the nomination survey after asking for noteworthy churches predisposed nominators to submit churches that were still strong in their ministry to young people, even though they were not quite as strong as the initial group nominated. In the end, the research team decided this “more typical” group was unhelpful as a matched comparison sample and additional analyses were not conducted on these churches.

- Group Two: The next 15 churches were selected based on the highest combined average ratings across all of the eight church characteristic questions.<sup>22</sup>
- Group Three: Next, 14 remaining churches were selected that scored highest on seven individual church characteristic questions. Two churches were included for each characteristic, excluding the characteristic related to “communicating the gospel.”<sup>23</sup>
- Group Four: Finally, 14 churches were chosen based on the research team’s examination of the narratives of the Stage One surveys and unique or exemplary features of these churches.

The research team sequentially invited 58 exemplary churches to participate in Stage Two of the research, resulting in 41 participating churches. A point person from the congregation was selected by each church and was responsible for working with the congregation’s leaders to identify congregants to participate in an interview. Using an online nomination form, this point person identified young people ages 18-29,<sup>24</sup> parents of teenagers and emerging adults, church staff, and youth/young adult ministry volunteers, up to a total of 40 people per church. Invitations were sent to nominated congregants until up to 20 agreed to participate in an interview.<sup>25</sup> FYI’s research team, including the primary researchers and fourteen graduate students from Fuller Seminary’s Schools of Theology, Psychology, and Intercultural Studies, conducted the approximately 60-minute structured phone interviews. Interviewers received extensive training by the project’s Senior Research Advisors. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

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<sup>22</sup> Since the Stage One analyses demonstrated a relationship between these characteristics and church effectiveness, the research team found them to be viable selection criteria.

<sup>23</sup> The team determined that this characteristic was the most broadly stated of the eight and most widely interpreted by Stage One participants. Therefore, the team sought to understand the topic better in Stages Two and Three rather than use it as selection criteria for inclusion in Stage Two.

<sup>24</sup> The research team determined to wait to conduct interviews and focus groups with minors (ages 15-17 years old) until the church site visits in Stage Three. This decision was made so that the project could be explained and informed consent could be obtained from parents in person.

<sup>25</sup> The median number of participants per church was 14. One church only yielded three participants, motivating the inclusion of an additional church (41 churches, as opposed to the originally proposed 40 churches) for the purposes of our analyses. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were primarily conducted using aggregated data in order to identify qualities and practices common to our sample of churches. The number of individuals from a particular church who participated in Stage 2 was considered when identifying churches for our third stage of research, and churches with less than six participants were excluded from consideration due to low participation. Church size did not impact the number of participants yielded from each church.

Stage Two interviews were conducted individually, and included several questions regarding demographic information of the participant, areas of involvement in the church, a description of the church, participant's perspective on why the church is effective with young people, how young people contribute to the church, Likert scale ratings and open-ended questions based on the church characteristics identified in the literature review,<sup>26</sup> Likert scale ratings and open-ended questions about the participant's beliefs and faith practices,<sup>27</sup> and an opportunity to share any other information the participant deemed important. Participants were assured of their anonymity and the removal of personally-identifiable information from the transcripts. One interview template was created for use with young people and a slightly different version was used with parents, volunteers, and church leaders. The interview protocols were designed by FYI's research team, undergoing several rounds of review by the project's advisors as well as pilot testing prior to being approved by Fuller's Institutional Review Board.

### *Participants*

Over 14 denominations were represented in Stage Two, in addition to 7 congregations claiming no denominational affiliation. The five specific traditions with the largest representation were Baptist (7 churches), United Methodist (4), Roman Catholic (4), Nazarene (3), and Evangelical Covenant (3). Churches ranged in size of participants, including 100 or fewer participants (2 percent of churches), 101-250 (20 percent), 251-500 (17 percent), 501-1000 (24 percent), 1001-3000 (20 percent), over 3001 (17 percent). In terms of census regions of the US, they were distributed among the Midwest (29 percent), West (29 percent), South (27 percent) and Northeast (15 percent). In terms of ethnic diversity (based on reporting churches), 48 percent of churches identified as "mostly White," 34 percent were multiracial (meaning the congregation included at least 20 percent or more from two different ethnic/racial groups), 8 percent were "mostly African American," 5 percent were "mostly Asian," and 5 percent were "mostly Hispanic/Latino." Regarding socioeconomic status (based on reporting churches), 37 percent reported primarily upper middle class, 49 percent primarily middle class, and 14 percent primarily lower middle.

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<sup>26</sup> For example, one question in this scale was, "How true is it that your church teaches people how to interact with cultural and societal issues?"

<sup>27</sup> For example, one question in this scale was, "How true is it that you talk about your faith with others who are not Christians?" An example of an open-ended question about faith maturity is, "In a few sentences, how would you describe the central message of the gospel, or good news, of Christianity?"

Of the 535 individual interview participants in Stage Two, 60 percent were male and 40 percent were female. Reported age or role in the church (based on the reason they were nominated for the study) was distributed as 18 years old (6 percent), 19-23 years old (17 percent), 24-29 years old (21 percent), youth/young adult ministry volunteer (19 percent), parent of a teenager or young adult (14 percent), and church leader (23 percent). In terms of racial/ethnic diversity, interview participants identified as Asian/Asian American (10 percent), Black/African American (6 percent), Hispanic/Latino (6 percent), Caucasian/White (73 percent), Pacific Islander (0.4 percent), and from multiple races (4.6 percent). Regarding highest education level completed, participants reported “less than high school” (1 percent), high school (9 percent), some college (18 percent), college degree (41 percent), master’s degree (27 percent), doctoral degree (4 percent). In terms of household income,<sup>28</sup> 2 percent reported “far below average,” 16 percent “below average,” 38 percent “average,” 38 percent “above average,” and 6 percent “far above average.”

### *Data analysis*

The Stage Two interviews concluded in November 2014, yielding nearly 10,000 pages of interview transcripts.<sup>29</sup> Fourteen graduate students from Fuller Seminary coded the transcripts over a period of eight months with supervision and regular review by FYI’s core research team and the CEYP Project’s Senior Research Advisors. Teams of two graduate students were assigned to each interview question, and they began by independently reading transcripts to generate a list of themes.<sup>30</sup> Then they met to create a set of open codes and code definitions. FYI’s core research team reviewed the selected codes and suggested appropriate modifications. Each coding team then created a final set of codes, which was again reviewed by FYI’s core research team, Tyler Greenway (FYI’s Research Coordinator), and Dr. James Furrow. Using NVivo qualitative coding software, teams proceeded to code an initial 25 transcripts before submitting their work to be tested for inter-rater reliability. Utilizing NVivo’s coding comparison

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<sup>28</sup> Participants were asked to indicate their household income as compared to their perception of the national norm.

<sup>29</sup> Transcribers removed church names, individuals’ names, city names, and any other personally-identifiable information, coding each transcript using an alpha-numeric code for tracking purposes and to identify response category for analysis (for example, 12.YPC.2 would indicate the second interviewee from the category of “young person age 24-29” in church number twelve).

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the work of Braun and Clarke, the research team also reviewed and utilized the strengths of coding found in Consensual Qualitative Research. See Clara E. Hill et al., “Consensual Qualitative Research: An Update,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52, no. 2, (2005): 196-205.

tool, Cohen's Kappa was calculated to test for consensus between coders for each transcript. If a Kappa of .6 or higher was not achieved, teams continued to code an additional set of 10 transcripts at a time until sufficient inter-rater reliability was reached. Once this took place, coding teams divided the remaining transcripts and coded independently.

Coded data were then compiled into tables for review by the core research team. Various cross-tabulations were also applied to the coded data, and subsequent analyses and further coding took place based on any further inquiries of the core research team. In addition to the coding of the qualitative responses, the quantitative data from the Likert scales was analyzed using SPSS. Quantitative data were analyzed using regression analyses to examine relationships between various demographics variables, church characteristics, and faith maturity ratings. Quantitative data were also examined using various statistical analyses to investigate relationships with the coded qualitative data.

Near the end of Stage Two data collection, FYI hosted a 3-day CEYP Research Summit, gathering the project's Expert Advisory Council and Senior Research Advisors. Detailed presentations were given on the project's research method and progress, learning to date on Stages One and Two, and intended research design for Stage Three. The advisors affirmed several of the findings based on their area of expertise, suggested areas for improvement in the remaining stage of the research, and identified topics for deeper exploration. Later in the research analysis process, Dr. Pamela King and Dr. Cameron Lee from Fuller Seminary's School of Psychology conducted an audit of the coding process.

### **Stage Three research**

#### *Overview, selection process and protocols*

In spring 2015, the research team selected 12 churches (from the 41 in Stage Two) to serve as illustrative case studies for deeper analysis in Stage Three. This analysis consisted of participant observation, document analysis, interviews, and focus groups. In order to select these 12 churches, the team began by eliminating the ten churches with the lowest number of interview participants in Stage Two and any churches which were not well positioned to participate in this

final stage of research.<sup>31</sup> Next, the research team eliminated two churches in which less than 14 percent of their overall church population consisted of young people. A formula was then created that assigned a numeric value to each church by combining the percentage of the overall church that was made up of young people and a composite score based on three questions from the Stage Two interviews that indicated the church included a high percentage of people with a vibrant faith.<sup>32</sup> These weighted values were used to rank the remaining 29 churches.

This process resulted in a pool of potential churches displaying both high vibrancy and high participation of young people. In order to select churches that might serve as a diverse sample for the sake of the illustrative case studies, the research team created multiple categories deemed important for representation. This included a variety of denominations, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, and church sizes. For each representative category, the church with the highest vibrancy/participation weighted rating was selected. A total of 14 churches were invited in order to identify the final 12 that participated. Churches agreed to forego anonymity in this stage of the study, but individuals interviewed were assured their identities would not be used without further permission.

Teams of two or three researchers conducted the site visit to each of the 12 churches. The teams consisted of either Dr. Powell, Mr. Mulder, or Mr. Griffin as well as a graduate student from Fuller Seminary's School of Theology or School of Psychology.<sup>33</sup> A 25-page research protocol was designed that included templates for observation, interviews, and field notes. The protocol was designed with input and review from the project's advisors, and subsequently approved by Fuller's Institutional Review Board.

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<sup>31</sup> For example, one church was going through a significant staff change as three of its paid leaders had left the church since the time the Stage Two interviews began. This change would have made it difficult for the FYI research team to conduct the necessary research.

<sup>32</sup> These composite scores were calculated based on average ratings for each church of the statements, "My church effectively equips people to grow as followers of Jesus Christ," "My church equips people to follow Jesus in their job, at school, or the other daily activities of life," and "My church helps people know and understand the gospel, or 'good news,' of Christianity."

<sup>33</sup> With the exception of one visit, which due to scheduling complications was conducted by two trained doctoral students who had each completed at least one visit with a member of the core research team. Dr. Powell, Mr. Mulder, and Mr. Griffin were trained in ethnographic research methods by Dr. Chap Clark of Fuller Seminary's School of Theology. Together, the four conducted a pilot visit to a church in the greater Los Angeles area. After that pilot visit, Dr. Clark trained the remaining graduate students. A foundational text that was required reading for the research team and guided much of the training was Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

While each visit was customized to the congregation's unique context, a typical site visit took place over one weekend. Before the visit, each team reviewed the church's online survey responses, interview transcripts, website, printed documents sent by the church's point person, several sermons, and any other information that was publicly available. The church point person set up interviews and focus groups with church staff, high school students, young people ages 19-23, young people ages 24-29, parents of teenagers and emerging adults, youth/young adult ministry volunteers, congregants that could speak to the church's history, and others as deemed necessary. The research team also attended all possible church activities and programs, including services, youth/young adult gatherings, Sunday school, and any other weekend programming. As much as possible, one research team member was selected for each visit whose own background matched the denominational affiliation and/or ethnic makeup of the church being studied. Further, for visits in which no member of the research team had significant experience (such as the Roman Catholic Church), the project's advisors from this background provided additional training for the team prior to the visit. During all visits, interviews and focus groups were recorded and extensive field notes were kept.

### *Participants*

Over 8 traditions were represented in Stage Three research, in addition to 2 churches indicating no denominational affiliation. The denominational makeup of this stage included 3 Baptist churches, as well as 1 church each that identified as Assemblies of God, Evangelical Covenant, Christian Reformed, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and United Methodist. Churches ranged in size of active congregational participants, including 100 or fewer participants (1 church), 101-250 (2 churches), 251-500 (1 church), 501-1000 (4 churches), 1001-3000 (3 churches), and over 3001 (1 church). In terms of census regions of the U.S., they were distributed among the Midwest (3 churches), West (2 churches), South (4 churches) and Northeast (3 churches). Ethnic diversity included 4 churches that identified as "mostly White," 4 multiracial churches, 2 "mostly African American" churches, 1 "mostly Asian" church, and 1 "mostly Hispanic/Latino" church. Regarding socioeconomic status, 5 churches were primarily upper-middle class, 5 churches primarily middle class, and 2 churches primarily lower middle.

### *Data analysis*



The Stage Three site visits concluded during the summer of 2015. An average of 60 pages of field notes were generated from each visit, for a total of nearly 720 pages across all Stage Three churches. After each visit, the two or three research team members met to combine their notes into a comprehensive report. The core FYI research team read and reflected on these reports, both while the visits were being conducted and again after they were complete.

This on-the-ground research from Stage Three was used alongside the quantitative and qualitative analyses from Stage One and Stage Two and became a lens through which the data from earlier stages was interpreted. The core research team was also in regular dialogue with the advisors from the project regarding potential interpretation of the findings. The nine church characteristics were narrowed down to a list of five that stood out as most common and important across the churches in the study. Upon further reflection on the site visits and ongoing data analysis, the research team added a sixth and final characteristic of “empathizing with today’s young people.” Also at this time, the research team chose to describe these as the six “core commitments” of churches that effectively engage young people.

During the summer and fall of 2015, the core research team sent detailed reports of the project’s findings to each member of the Senior Research Advisors, Expert Advisory Council, and Pastoral Advisory Council. Through one-on-one and group phone calls or meetings, these 30 advisors provided feedback on one or two of the core commitments that were most closely aligned with their expertise as well as input on a general summary of findings. The advisors provided perspective and affirmation based on their own experience and research, and offered input regarding areas that seemed to be missing.

In addition, the core research team also presented select findings to a group of scholars and practitioners at the Association of Youth Ministry Educator’s fall 2015 conference as well as a group of 50 church leaders at a 2015 Engaging Young People Summit at Fuller Theological Seminary.

### **Assumptions and limitations**

While the research team made every effort to ensure that the CEYP project has been as academically rigorous, practically accessible, and generally thorough as possible, no research

(ours included) is without assumptions or limitations. The following are just a few of the assumptions made and associated limitations of the study:

*Our context as researchers:* The research team understands our context as researchers to be both a strength and a weakness. The Fuller Youth Institute is located within Fuller Theological Seminary, one of the largest seminaries in the world. Given Fuller's multid denominational makeup and overall diversity, it has served as a wonderful and unique home in which to conduct this research. However, we recognize our location in Southern California, our own ethnic backgrounds, middle class socioeconomic status, and level of education have undoubtedly shaped the way in which the team approached this research. Significant effort was made to include other voices from a variety of contexts and backgrounds (both as advisors to the project and as research assistants) to provide the widest perspective possible.

*The importance of church participation:* In forming the foundations for the CEYP Project, the team assumed that church participation is important for all Christians. While "participating in a church" can take a variety of forms beyond simply filling a seat on Sunday morning, we still hold that it is important for all Christians to work out their faith in community rather than isolation. As a result, the research team chose to study church participation directly. Further, church participation was the assumed starting point rather than the question, "What helps a young person grow in their faith?" This is a valid and important question, and others have done commendable work on the topic. The CEYP Project did not ask questions about the detailed spiritual experiences of young people, but rather focused on their *experiences of church*.

*Reliance on perceived effectiveness:* Though the core commitments were found to be common across a variety of churches, the CEYP Project was largely reliant on what various leaders and congregants perceived to be effective. There are undoubtedly some variables that may not have been examined, such as those that did not come to mind during interviews or those that were unnoticed by participants. Other important factors not included in these analyses may certainly contribute to effectiveness with young people.

*The CEYP Project studied those who are involved:* Since a key aspect of the study was to focus on churches that are actually effective in their ministry to young people, this project did not study the thousands of young people who have disengaged from and are no longer part of a

church specifically, or the church generally. While their voices are important, less research has been conducted on the reasons why some stay involved in church.

*Generalizability of results:* The CEYP Project's findings will not apply to all people, at all times, in every setting. Rather, this study focuses on a particular group of exemplary churches in the United States in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. While the research team has included a diversity of church bodies and denominations, church sizes, ethnic and racial representation, socioeconomic status, and regions of the country, undoubtedly some churches will find the research difficult to apply to their unique context. Also, as touched on above, one limitation of exemplar methodology is that it does not necessarily reveal the path to success for churches that are currently not performing well.

*Correlation vs. causation:* The research team understands that American religious congregations are complex, including diverse groups of people, as well as evolving and overlapping systems and structures. The culture in which congregations are located is changing quickly, which only increases this complexity. Given this reality as well as the nature of the research design, the research team does not claim to have demonstrated a causal relationship between these core commitments and a church that is effective with young people. However, we're confident that the CEYP Project has identified six core commitments demonstrably present (through a variety of methods of data collection and analysis) within churches that grow young. The particular expression of each core commitment will vary based on the church's context. In the end, our desire is that this research will initiate helpful and life-giving conversations among church leaders. We're also hopeful that other scholars and researchers will review, test, and build on this work.

*Our theological commitments:* Finally, the Fuller Youth Institute (as part of Fuller Theological Seminary) holds particular beliefs and theological commitments that have grounded and guided our research. Undoubtedly these commitments have influenced the research in ways that those from other traditions may find unhelpful.

## **Research Findings**

Based upon the CEYP Project, the research team identified the following six core commitments as important for churches to better involve and retain young people, as well as help them develop a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup>

### *Unlock keychain leadership*

Instead of centralizing authority, empower others—especially young people. Churches in the study were brimming with staff, volunteers, and parents who demonstrate this leadership quality. In this definition, *keys* refer to the capabilities, power, and access of leaders who carry the potential to empower young people. *Keychain leadership* refers to pastoral and congregational leaders who are both acutely aware of the keys on their keychain, and intentional about entrusting and empowering all generations, including teenagers and emerging adults, with their own set of keys.

Beyond simply launching a student leadership team, *keychain leadership* is a spirit and commitment demonstrated by both paid and volunteer leaders that permeates every area of the church. The importance of leadership appeared across multiple stages of the study, including Stage Two in which pastoral leaders were asked to describe what accounts for their church’s effectiveness with young people. The coded responses revealed 48 percent of leaders named church leadership, which ranked ahead of worship style, emphasis on social justice, and utilizing the latest technology.

### *Empathize with today’s young people*

Instead of judging or criticizing, step into the shoes of this generation. For the purpose of this study, empathy refers to *feeling with* young people. As defined by Stanford University’s “D.” [Design] School, empathizing is “the work you do to understand people...it is your effort to understand the way they do things and why, their physical and emotional needs, how they think

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<sup>34</sup> It is not the aim of this paper to provide a full explanation of these core commitments, but instead to provide an overview of the high-level findings. For a more thorough treatment of the findings, please see: Kara E. Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016).

about the world, and what is meaningful to them.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, it’s *sitting on the curb of a young person’s life*, celebrating their dreams, and grieving over their despair. As previously noted, empathy was added as a final core commitment in large part based upon observation from site visits and conversation with advisors regarding themes in the data that were not clearly evident from one or two independent statistics.

### *Take Jesus’ message seriously*

Instead of asserting formulaic gospel claims, welcome young people into a Jesus-centered way of life. This commitment was both a demonstrated action and overall spirit or ethos of churches in the study. Jesus’ message is not contained in just one core commitment; rather the Good News of Jesus permeates and indeed animates all other commitments. As one example of how this core commitment emerged during the research, when interview participants were asked, “How would you describe the central message of the gospel or good news, of Christianity?” nearly 70 percent of respondents specifically mentioned Jesus.

### *Fuel a warm community*

Instead of focusing on cool worship or programs, aim for warm peer and intergenerational friendships. In the team’s analyses of the terms young people and adults used to describe their churches or parishes, words such as *welcoming, belonging, authentic, hospitable, and caring* were repeated regularly and were categorized as the “warmth” cluster. Across various statistical analyses, the warmth cluster emerged as a stronger variable than any one program in relationship with vibrancy and effectiveness.

### *Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere*

Instead of giving lip service to how much young people matter, look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource, and involve them in all facets of the congregation. Churches in the study made teenagers and young adults an institutional priority not only for specific youth or young adult programming but also across the life of the congregation. This institutional

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<sup>35</sup> Institute of Design at Stanford, “An Introduction to Design Thinking Process Guide,” <https://dschool.stanford.edu/sandbox/groups/designresources/wiki/36873/attachments/74b3d/ModeGuideBOOTCAM2010L.pdf?sessionID=9a5d0a2a0cd5fb6c26a567b2636b19513b76d0f4>.

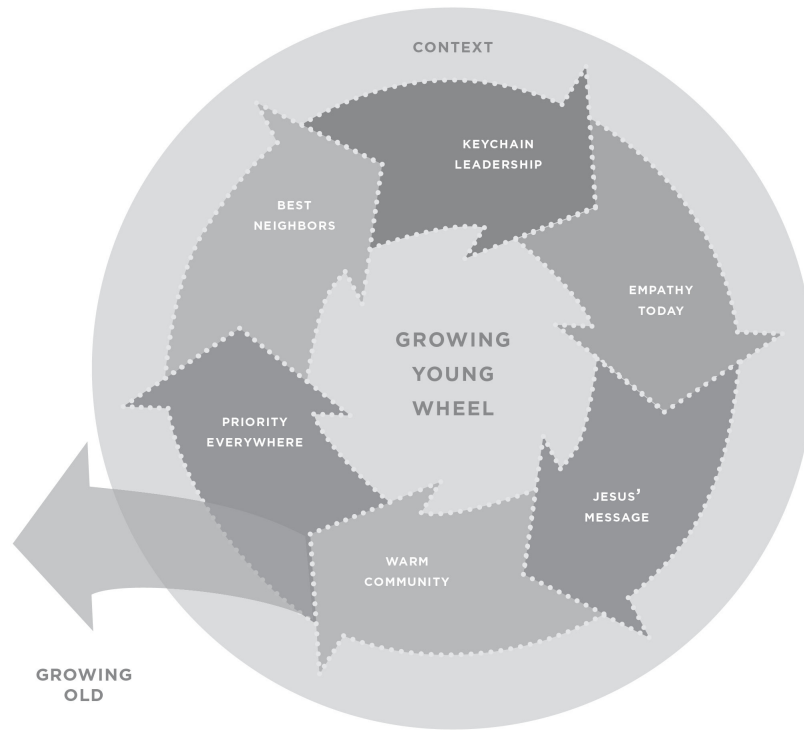
commitment was demonstrated across the study, including the first stage of research where pastoral leaders were asked to name up to three characteristics of their church that account for its success at engaging young people. The top response category was coded as “making young people and their interests a priority in the church,” representing approximately 50 percent of all responses.

### *Be the best neighbors*

Instead of condemning the world outside the church walls, enable young people to neighbor well locally and globally. Churches in the study recognized the careful dance that values both fidelity to Scripture’s commands for holiness and knowing and graciously loving their neighbors. This dance affects how they serve, pursue social justice, help teenagers and emerging adults find their calling, interact with popular culture, and respond to heated cultural issues. Beyond developing detailed policies or releasing theological position papers, these churches train and infuse their young people with an integrated discipleship that enables them to thrive in a complex world. This finding was also demonstrated across all stages of the research, including in stage two where interview participants were asked, “What is it about your church that makes it effective with young people?” Nearly 60 percent of respondents named service practices, missional practices, or generally being outward oriented.

### *The Growing Young Wheel*

The research team developed the diagram below to illustrate how this theoretical framework of the six core commitments relate to each other.



While any diagram falls short of fully capturing the intricacy and nuance intended, the research team offers the following points as guidelines for interpretation.

*The order is flexible.* The Growing Young wheel follows the chronological sequence the research team observed most commonly. In other words, more congregations move toward greater effectiveness with teenagers and young adults by beginning with keychain leadership than any other core commitment. But some congregations inaugurate the process through other portals (most notably, through warm community and prioritizing young people).

*The boundaries are permeable.* The distinction among the core commitments is not always clean. Dotted lines separate them because they often bleed into each other and become difficult to distinguish.

*The turning point is priority.* The research team noted that churches who have keychain leaders, empathize with young people, focus on Jesus, and nurture warmth may eventually get

comfortable, face inward, and fail to engage young people well. If churches fail to prioritize young people everywhere, the other core commitments will likely not have the desired effect of engaging young people well.

*The context is pivotal.* The six core commitments are surrounded by a layer of context because of the way churches listened and adapted constantly to the teenagers and emerging adults in their specific congregation and city. The research team found very little “plug and play” forms of ministry, but instead witnessed a strong focus on contextualization.

*The gospel is the overriding motivation.* As with other pursuits, churches’ passion to engage young people well is motivated by their dedication to walk in the way of Jesus, and invite young people to join them.

## **Discussion**

The Fuller Youth Institute’s research team does not claim that this theoretical framework of the Growing Young wheel and six core commitments is definitive, all encompassing, static, or otherwise final. While the team is confident that this provides a helpful and life-giving starting point for discussion and exploration for churches and youth ministry educators, we’re hopeful that other scholars and researchers will both challenge and build on this work.

*Questions for discussion: How do the six core commitments and the theoretical framework in the Growing Young wheel resonate with your context, field of research, and/or lived experience in the church? How is this framework helpful? How is this framework less helpful? What questions does it raise for further study?*



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