

**Creating a Culture of Yes: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study from Youth Becoming  
Leaders: High School Christian Leadership and Global Transformation Institute**

James Hampton, Brian Hull, Jezri Leong, and Caleigh Smith (Asbury University)

Association of Youth Ministry Educators (AYME)

Annual Conference, 2026

### **Abstract**

Too often, American high school students face a Culture of No, where they are told to wait before they can participate in meaningful Christian leadership. However, God says that youth are capable of leading now and in the future. For eleven years Asbury University hosted a two-week Lilly-funded Youth Theology Institute called Youth Becoming Leaders: High School Christian Leadership and Global Transformation Institute (YBL). This paper assesses qualitative data, such as journal entries, recorded group discussions, and ministry project reports, from the first eight years of the program to determine that YBL is effective in meeting one of its primary goals: To enable high school students to value the role of the Christian community (especially the role of the local church) in forming and fulfilling personal calling and God's mission to culture. Rather than joining the chorus of "no's" in students' lives, YBL intentionally creates and models a Culture of Yes for its participants. This Culture of Yes consists of saying "yes" to God, "yes" to neighbor, particularly through listening, and "yes" to communal participation. Further, this paper offers practical applications for how Christian organizations that work with high school students can also create and model a Culture of Yes.

**Creating a Culture of Yes: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study from Youth Becoming Leaders: High School Christian Leadership and Global Transformation Institute**

No. No, not yet. No, you are not old enough. No, you are not educated or experienced enough. Too often, “no” is the response American high school students hear from adults when these adolescents consider leadership. However, “no” is not God’s default posture toward young people. Throughout Scripture, God calls and equips young people for meaningful leadership at the age and stage they are, and God continues this work today. Joining God in this work means creating a Culture of Yes where American high school students are encouraged and empowered to lead in their local churches and communities.

In 2023 Youth Becoming Leaders: High School Christian Leadership and Global Transformation Institute (YBL) began a longitudinal qualitative study to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in meeting its goals since it began in 2016. Although “Creating a Culture of Yes” was not explicitly stated within the language of the Institute’s five goals, it was a verbally stated goal of YBL’s staff from the very beginning, and the data, consisting of words from high school participants and Asbury University student leaders, overwhelmingly communicated this concept. A Culture of Yes, consisting of “yes” to God, “yes” to neighbor, and “yes” to communal participation, was closely related to the Institute’s third goal: To enable high school students to value the role of the Christian community (especially the role of the local church) in forming and fulfilling personal calling and God’s mission to culture. A Culture of Yes created by Christian community, especially the local church, is a vital contributor to a young person’s sustained engagement in Christian leadership.

## **Youth Becoming Leaders: High School Christian Leadership and Global Transformation Institute**

### ***YBL History***

Asbury University believes that high school students can be great, Christ-like leaders today and in the future. This belief is at the root of YBL. An earlier program with similar goals, the Call Conference, began in 2010. Asbury University hosted a weekend event for high school students who sensed a call to full-time vocational ministry. The multi-year success of this event demonstrated the need for increased time and resource investment in high school student leadership. When the Lilly Endowment opened applications for a Youth Theology Institute grant focusing on Christian Colleges and Universities in 2015, Asbury University had an opportunity to further meet this need.

Asbury University's proposal for YBL expanded the timeline and teaching previously offered through the Call Conference. The purpose of YBL is to equip high school students for theologically guided living and decision-making through immersion in Christian Scripture, theological texts, tradition, service, and community to lead and serve in a complex global society. YBL is a two-week residential program for high school students to become the leaders God has called them to be.

High school freshmen through graduating seniors from across the United States are invited to apply. Students accepted to YBL travel to Asbury University's campus to experience deep Christian community, biblical and theological instruction from Asbury University and Asbury Theological Seminary faculty, training and practice in spiritual disciplines, research in global and local culture, observation and teaching with local ministry leaders, hands-on

community service, development of a ministry project to implement in their own church and community with support from their chosen mentor, and guidance in discerning their calling.

Within the 2016-2023 timeframe of this research study, 201 high school students from 26 states and various Christian denominations have participated in YBL.

### ***YBL Goals***

As a Christian liberal arts university that is rooted in the Wesleyan and Methodistic tradition of preparing and sending young people into ministry, YBL established the following goals for the Institute:

1. To enable high school students' sense of vocational calling to be shaped by a deeper understanding of Scripture, theological texts and tradition.
2. To enable high school students to recognize and value cultures as the place where, out of love, Christ is incarnate.
3. To enable high school students to value the role of the Christian community (especially the role of the local church) in forming and fulfilling personal calling and God's mission to culture.
4. To enable high school students to meaningfully participate in worship, spiritual disciplines and service as an outflow of their calling.
5. To enable high school students to articulate a definition of Christian leadership.

***YBL Longitudinal Qualitative Study***

Although YBL analyzed quantitative data annually, no significant longitudinal research had been conducted using qualitative data. During each day of the residential program, high school participants and Asbury University student leaders respond to journal prompts; following the residential program, high school students also submit one-, two-, and three-month ministry project reports. YBL also conducted two focus groups over the eight years of YBL alumni. These journals and reports, spanning from 2016 to 2023, were reviewed to assess YBL's effectiveness in meeting its goals, identify themes that emerged over the eight-year period, and share relevant implications for organizations, such as local churches and other Youth Theology Institutes, in their work with high school students. Other papers co-authored by YBL staff have largely focused on the first and fifth of YBL's goals. This paper aims to explore YBL's third goal as well as how Christian community, especially local churches, can apply the theme of creating a Culture of Yes.

***Biases***

It is important to acknowledge the researchers' biases:

1. Three of the four researchers have been part of Youth Becoming Leaders staff; therefore, our paid positions were closely tied to the effectiveness and success of the Institute. (Our fourth researcher was an undergraduate student not previously associated with YBL who skillfully coded the qualitative data.)
2. Three of the four researchers have served in and taught youth ministry, so we believe in and have participated in creating a Culture of Yes across various settings. To aid in

objective observation and interpretation of the data, we employed an expert outside our organization to guide our initial discussions on themes and implications.

### **Defining Culture of Yes**

Before we can evaluate YBL's third goal or explore how organizations can create a Culture of Yes, we must define a Culture of Yes. There are three key sequential components. First is saying "yes" to God, then saying "yes" to our neighbor, then participating in this work communally. This posture not only applies to high school students, but it is also a posture purposefully adopted by YBL leadership. YBL staff intentionally choose not to join the chorus of "no's" in students' lives; creating a Culture of Yes is founded in the belief that young people are capable and that God is still speaking to and through them.

#### ***Yes to God***

During day one of the residential program, after a couple of hours of team building, students and staff sit down to enjoy dinner together and engage in the first formal teaching session. This YBL orientation begins with staff asking students, "Do you think the world needs better leaders?" Each year, students are quick to respond affirmatively to this question and its follow-up, "Do you think the church needs better leaders?" YBL staff encourage students that the world needs strong leaders in the church to initiate this change from a theologically grounded and informed perspective with their eyes on Christ, and Asbury University believes these teenagers can be those leaders. We acknowledge honestly how often young people encounter a Culture of No, being told that they cannot, that they do not belong in leadership, that they are irresponsible, that they are not ready, that they are without direction. We starkly contrast the assertions of this Culture of No with the Culture of Yes where God says youth are capable of

hearing him, capable of listening, capable of obeying, capable of trusting him, capable of leading in their local communities like Samuel, David, Jeremiah, Mary, the disciples, the boy who gave five loaves and two fish, and many other young people in Scripture.

YBL begins creating a Culture of Yes by articulating that we are a safe place:

- To think, explore, wrestle, doubt, and be honest with assumptions, questions, faith, calling and vocation, and views of how the world works.
- To be stretched intellectually, ideologically, relationally, and spiritually through Scripture and theology.
- To be prepared by learning from some of the best scholars and some great mentors and church leaders in their home contexts who love Jesus and believe in them.
- To experience rhythms of prayer and various spiritual disciplines.
- To have time to reflect.
- To participate in the abundant life Christ has for them.

After setting this environment, we further the conversation about a Culture of Yes by defining Christian Leadership. When asked what the world says about leadership, students are also quick to respond by describing worldly leadership as all about gaining influence, power, and control for oneself. Another stark contrast is made as we present YBL's working definition of Christian Leadership: joining Christ in making space for people to discover and live into their God-given gifts, dreams, and calling for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

This Christian leadership definition helps structure the three aspects of a Culture of Yes. At the heart of creating a Culture of Yes is joining Christ, joining God's mission to make himself known to the whole world. Within the Wesleyan tradition, we recognize God's prevenient grace. Christ in his love is already at work through his Holy Spirit, pursuing everyone to come into a relationship with him. One student reflected,

It is truly inspiring. It's amazing to realize that God loves me and calls me for who I am, not by [sic] my earthly possessions or accomplishments. I sometimes get so tired of being judged by my talents and skills. Society today gets so wrapped up in my strengths and weaknesses that they ignore who I am. God believes in me for who I am inside. It does change my attitude and the [sic] way I see things. My perspective shifts when I start looking at my life through God's eyes not [sic] through the expectations of the world. When we fully comprehend that God believes in us more [sic] than we can imagine, our passion lights on fire [sic]. (2022.8ABN)

The first and most crucial step in creating a Culture of Yes is saying "yes" to God's loving and gracious invitation to join his mission.

### ***Yes to Neighbor***

The next part of YBL's Christian Leadership definition emphasizes making space for others, or saying "yes" to our neighbor. Again, Christian leadership is not about focusing on one's own assets or abilities; rather, it is about joining Christ in God's relational mission. The main way YBL students practice Christian Leadership and make space for others is through their ministry projects.

Prior to the residential program, YBL provides a ministry project overview to students and the mentors these students have chosen from their home churches and communities. Projects vary, but students and mentors always begin by having conversations about needs particular to their context, and they pray together for discernment about how God might be calling and gifting

students to serve and lead in these areas. One student expressed how mentors and congregations help create a Culture of Yes by starting with noticing what God is already up to among the people in their community and seeking to join him there. “Through this project, I was able to learn a lot about the community of believers around me in my hometown. I learned how giving they are and how willing they are to help and how supportive they are of me. I also learned a lot about my community...and a little bit more about where the need is and what ministry might look like here” (2019.M3.BLL).

Although students are expected to complete a ministry project checklist for planning and sustainability, instruction about ministry projects during the residential program does not begin with the checklist. Rather than falling into the temptation to make the ministry project about students’ own achievements and performance, which would come under the definition of worldly leadership explained earlier, the first teaching session about ministry projects begins with seeking God’s direction for these students and their home communities.

At the halfway point of the residential program, YBL participants leave Asbury University’s campus for a twenty-four-hour Sabbath retreat at a nearby monastery. Students are given guidance on and examples of spiritual disciplines, especially prayer practices, and they spend hours in silence and solitude asking God to reveal to them his heart for the people in their churches and communities as well as the specific ways he is inviting them to join his work in their contexts. One student expressed, “I think one of the main things that can help me to realize all the hurt around me is just asking God for help to see those things. This will go a long way and will really help me reach out to others” (2017.9Y). God is faithful to sanctify us with love for our neighbor and open our eyes to the needs in our communities.

Any ministry project tasks that students complete later in the program related to meeting these needs simply flow from God's relational mission. One student shared,

I have learned that even though I want to be in control of every circumstance, it always turns out best when God is in complete control. I have learned that no matter how much I plan it will never turn out as well if I am not putting God in the center. While planning is an important component, it is so small compared to being in tune with Jesus and listening for His voice. (2021.M3.AAL)

This student highlights that joining Christ in God's mission is foundational to their leadership through their ministry project.

Defining Christian leadership and engaging in the Sabbath retreat inspire students to surrender their own plans for God's best not only in their lives, but also in the lives of the people around them. Another student recognized the need for this surrender in their life:

Take away my own personal agenda. It is so easy for me to put on some [sic] blinders on my own personal path to what I believe is success. So many times this [sic] causes me to pass others by and ignore the real needs. In order to see those in need [sic] around me, I must focus on God's path which will show me the needs that I can fulfill [sic] as [sic] I go instead of focusing on my own personal path. (2022.9ABJ)

Both in planning and in implementing their ministry projects in their communities, students recognized the difference between operating out of their own strength and participating in God's mission.

Because of this, I have let go, observing how my plans not working out, but the project still pulling together, it has been obvious that God has taken the project into His hands. It was stressful at first, because of my controlling nature, but now I have a peace about not being in control. That I am merely a vessel. I'm praying that this peace of letting go will expand into every part of my life starting with this project. And, I trust, this experience will favor me well in youth ministry and is preparing me to realize this is the beginning of my life of ministry and it will NEVER be MY ministry, not even from the start, it is GOD'S, and will ALWAYS be HIS (2018.M1.H)

One student reflected on how transformational it was to surrender their own ambitions and instead say “yes” to God’s mission and their neighbor.

It takes a complete mind change. Most of us are so determined when we [sic] are walking around to get to a destination, but if we are only focuses [sic] on our [sic] goals, we lose sight of the important thing: the process. On Jesus’ path to [sic] the cross, he had a destination—but he didn’t use it as an excuse to ignore [sic] trouble around him. He stopped to help everyone who had faith in him. (2018.9K)

Another student more specifically defined Kingdom-oriented success in joining God’s mission in their community.

I have definitely been learning a lot recently that God isn’t really concerned with numbers or achievements like we are. I think so often we get so focused on getting more people there or reaching our next goal that we miss the relationships and the one on one and the messy, doesn’t look good on paper kind of stuff that God is in. So for my project I want to make sure I don’t miss that stuff focusing on the numbers because I want to have an eternal kingdom impact on these kids regardless of whether that means I get to give an impressive number report or not. (2021.M1.AAQ)

**Listening.** The kind of presence this student described was emphasized by many students as a key way to say “yes” to our neighbor. They articulated the power of truly listening.

I think in order to really see those around me I will have to be able to listen to those around me. I want to be present not just hearing what they say and losing the words or getting distracted [sic] by my next word or what I’m thinking about in the moment. But really listening and being there [sic] for that person I think the people that often need the most help are the once [sic] that we forget to [sic] listen to or the once’s [sic] who’s voices get trapped behind all the other sounds around them. (2022.9ABO)

Students explicitly stated that listening well is a way to love our neighbor: “I learned that ministry can look like just showing up and helping and it doesn’t necessarily need to be a fleshed out plan. Ministry can just be sitting down, talking, and making people feel loved/listened to” (2019.4AT). They also planned how they would practice this listening in their local communities after the residential program.

I think back home I could help my community, friends, family, and youth group by being there for anyone. Just being there for anyone who needs someone to listen and be there for them. No matter what mistakes they have made or hard times they are going through it can be super helpful for people just to know that there is someone there who supports them and who loves them. (2018.3E)

Students not only understood listening as a practice they could implement to love their neighbor well, but they also felt loved by those in their local churches who listened to them as they served God and neighbor together.

### ***Yes to Communal Participation***

Furthermore, students realized that saying “yes” to God’s mission and saying “yes” to our neighbor is not a solo endeavor. They reached out to their peers, mentors, and congregations to collaborate in this work for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

I have learned and am continuing to learn to ask for help and guidance from others. I’ve discovered the power of sitting and talking things out, and that’s been really freeing since it reminds me that I don’t bear this project on my own shoulders alone. First and foremost the project is God’s, but He has also shown me how He has blessed me with other people who are excited for and invested in my “Kingdom dreams” and will share the work along with me; they want to help. (2016.M3.AL)

They also recognized the benefits of the Body of Christ coming together to share their gifts.

Having people like my mentor, family, pastor, and [sic] the youth group all be willing to use their various gifts in order to achieve this project, has [sic] taught me a lot about the church and how its members need to work together to do what [sic] God has called us to do. Finally, I have been able to see the needs of our church [sic] members with things they aren’t able to do themselves that we are able to help with as a [sic] group. Overall, the early stages of my project have shifted my attention on how we can [sic] help those in need, using all the abilities God has given us. (2021.M1.AAP)

A Culture of Yes requires saying “yes” to God and God’s mission, saying “yes” to loving our neighbor, and saying “yes” to all of this within the context of community.

***YBL Leadership***

These three aspects of a culture of “yes” are not reserved for high school students. YBL staff deliberately choose to adopt this posture of “yes” to God, “yes” to neighbor, and “yes” to communal participation in their design and leadership of the program. It shows up in our training of staff, our decision-making, and our adaptation of the program both in the moment and in our long-term adjustments.

In our planning conversations with Asbury University faculty working with YBL and in our first training session for hired Asbury University student leaders, we explicitly describe the earlier defined Culture of Yes. We set the expectation that they will participate in it and encourage high school students to do the same. We return to the Culture of Yes often as we equip them to facilitate small group discussions by listening well to students’ questions and insights, as we make daily space for the college leaders to debrief what God is doing in their own lives and how that is shaping their personal calling, and as we prepare them to give leadership opportunities away to high school participants in the program.

One example of how we decided to implement this Culture of Yes came during one of these trainings for Asbury University student leaders. College staff arrive on campus a few days before the high school participants, but year-round YBL staff have already planned the detailed schedule of events and speakers. On the first day of training, another member of Asbury University’s faculty communicated to me as YBL Director that one of the college leaders was a gifted preacher. Rather than dismissing this opportunity as too late in the planning process, I initiated a conversation with the YBL Program Manager about where we could invite this college student to preach in the next few days of the residential program. Without hesitation, the YBL

Program Manager offered to step down from a session when he was scheduled to preach so that we could communally say yes to God's work in this college leader's life.

YBL staff have also adjusted the Institute based on high school students' requests. We found from one of our earlier papers examining this research that students see leadership as more than a position; they desire to help shape the vision of their local churches for serving their communities.

This project has definitely made me step out of my comfort zone in ways I never imagined. It has been quite the challenge to step into such a role of leadership. Being a leader isn't just about giving orders or leading others; it is also about taking time to show people an overlooked need and getting something started, making those first steps so others can join (2022.M3.ABN)

Because students expressed this desire, YBL staff added a new element to the Institute called Leadership Fellows. Leadership Fellows is designed for high school students who have already participated in YBL to return for an additional year and continue in their leadership development. These students arrive a day earlier than first-year participants for training about humility in leadership; we particularly focus on making space for others rather than holding positions for ourselves, as is demonstrated well in the YBL staff example above.

Leadership Fellows are each paired with an Asbury University student leader to provide guidance, and YBL staff listen to these participants' passions and create opportunities for them to lead. Sometimes these opportunities arise from the collective ideas of the whole group. For example, on one occasion the YBL Assistant Director restructured half of her teaching session on spiritual disciplines to accept Leadership Fellows' request to add a question and response panel where the Leadership Fellows shared about practices that have shaped their spiritual formation.

At other times, these opportunities are based on personal calling, such as specific Leadership Fellows working with the Program Manager to lead worship through music.

### **Value in Christian Community and the Local Church**

The effectiveness of YBL's third goal is clear. Students wrote with enthusiasm about how much they value Christian community, particularly the local church. One student shared the overall sentiment, "I have learned that I have a lot of people standing beside me ready to help me and guide me in Christ" (2021.M1.AZ). Many students made explicit statements about the role that Christian community, largely the local church, has in forming and fulfilling personal calling and God's mission to culture.

### ***Forming and Fulfilling Personal Calling***

Students appreciated how their local congregations helped them develop their understanding of personal calling and helped them live out their personal calling in their communities. "I also was able to engage in conversation with my peers and mentors which not only heeled [sic] me grow closer to them but also allowed me to discover things about myself" (2019.4AN). What students discovered about themselves in Christian community related to who God was calling them to be and how the community supported them in that calling.

I have learned that ministry is something that only happens in community. I wouldn't have been able to [sic] do this by myself. This program is going to be successful and impactful not because of what I am able to [sic] bring but what everyone together is able to bring. It's really cool to see how different people are and what [sic] they have to offer to the success of this program. What I have learned about myself is that I have a lot of [sic] people around me that believe in me and my gifts and vision. (2021.M3.AAA)

Students also received sustained support from within their local churches as they returned home following the residential program and began implementing their ministry projects. These

projects represented how God was personally calling them to minister in their local communities. Although at times this support was material and financial, students most appreciated that mentors offered them authentic relationships as well as time and space for students to process where God was leading them, their ministry projects, their churches, and their communities.

When I got home and discussed my project plans with my mom and more with my mentor they really helped me shape my project even more towered [sic] my goal and passion, and they still are! So many people have and are pouring into my spirit and encouraging me, standing beside me, as a [sic] navigate these difficult waters, the Lord really has blessed me with an amazing family and church family!! Im SO exited [sic] to see where the Lord leads this!!! (2021.M1.AZ)

Local congregations further encouraged students in pursuing God's calling and gifting in their lives.

The biggest thing I am learning as I start this project [sic] is that I have such a supportive community around me who jump at the opportunity to [sic] help me get [my project] up and running. It took me one phone call to get my project fully funded [sic] from the supplies to the location of the workshop event. I am also learning how passionate [sic] about this project I am the more I work on it. I see all the people around me helping me with it [sic] saying this is so you and I feel like I am really using my gifts to make an impact. (2021.M1.AAA)

Moreover, Christian community through the local church empowered students in leadership by pointing them to opportunities like YBL and by continuing to offer leadership opportunities following the residential program. "I constantly see opportunities to accept leadership in my church and I feel called to them mainly by the voices of others in my church encouraging me to take leadership and constantly pushing me to serve God in that way which was how I ended up here" (2021.2AAC).

### ***God's Mission to Culture***

Adults within students' local churches reminded them of the foundational "yeses" they made to God's mission and their neighbor. One student shared, "I plan on also having my mentor or just another person to help keep me [*sic*] in check so that I have someone to push me back into acting upon God's plan" (2018.3F). Another student also named how Christian community redirected her from her own ideas to God's mission.

That both my youth pastor and my mentor, who works in ministry have told me over and over is, ministry takes time and things don't always work out the way you planned. I'm definitely seeing that as I try and make plans for my project. I really loved to have everything planned out and know exactly what's going to happen and exactly how it's going to go so I think it has been really good for me to have to just wait and rely on God and trust that he has a plan for my project that is better than any plan I could have made. (2018.M1.E)

Students highlighted the significance of their relationships with their mentors. "As i [*sic*] start my project i [*sic*] have learned a lot about working with others and being able to lean on my mentor for support and guidance" (2021.M1.AAE). Mentors encouraged students to participate in God's mission within their context through the students' ministry projects. "My mentor has been incredible in helping me think through things and make smart decisions and I've had others from my church who have more experience than me in this area offer their advice/guidance so that's been helpful" (2021.M1.AAQ). Students highly valued the role mentors and local church congregations played in their personal calling and in God's mission, specifically in their communities.

### **How to Create a Culture of Yes**

Up to this point, we have defined a Culture of Yes as saying "yes" to God and God's mission, saying "yes" to loving neighbor especially through listening, and saying "yes" to

communal participation in this Kingdom work. We have also assessed that YBL has been successful in meeting its third goal: To enable high school students to value the role of the Christian community (especially the role of the local church) in forming and fulfilling personal calling and God's mission to culture. This effectiveness is demonstrated through participants valuing the role of Christian community in supporting students' engagement in the three key aspects of the definition of a Culture of Yes. In other words, when local churches embolden students to say "yes" to God, say "yes" to our neighbor, and say "yes" to communal participation, they create a Culture of Yes. Now, we turn to practical applications for local churches, Youth Theology Institutes, and other organizations that empower high school students in Christian leadership. Creating a Culture of Yes for high school students means living up to its definition and encouraging young people to do the same.

### ***Say Yes to God***

God's mission is to make himself known to the whole world. God's relational mission extends to high school students. Further, God is dreaming big dreams in young people. God says "yes" that youth are capable of meaningful engagement in his mission and leadership in their local churches and communities. If this is God's posture toward high school students, then can the church and ministries focused on youth also say "yes" to joining God in this work?

Commit not to participate in a Culture of No or a worldly definition of leadership. When it comes to age requirements for leadership, the Bible offers minimal parameters. In the Old Testament, only two are listed. The first parameter mentioned is twenty-years-old to be counted in the census, have increased tax rates, be conscripted for military service, and be required to make offerings to God. The second is found in Numbers 8:24, "This applies to the Levites: from

twenty-five years old and upward they shall begin to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting” (NRSV). In the New Testament, there are no age limitations specified regarding serving and leading.

If Scripture not only allows for but encourages young people such as Samuel, David, Jeremiah, Mary, the disciples, and the boy who gave five loaves and two fish to participate in meaningful leadership among the people of God and their communities, then why should contemporary American local churches place such age restrictions on high school Christian leaders? Leadership requirements in the Bible relate not to age, but to character. Samuel’s response to the Lord’s call is, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10). The Lord describes David as “a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:22; Acts 13:22). Mary’s posture is singing praise to the Lord after she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). God deems youth capable of hearing him, capable of listening, capable of obeying, capable of trusting him, and capable of leading. Adults in local churches should say “yes” to God and God’s mission by adopting his attitude toward adolescents, especially those in their local contexts.

One student shared about how significant this kind of support was in their own participation in God’s mission. “One thing f[sic] the main things that I learned about living gods [sic] call out is the importance of keeping a group of people who are willing to support you on your journey and help each other grow and manage the load that god [sic] has for you” (2019.6Z). The local church should be a place where students find Christian community that will encourage them in their gifting and calling from the Lord and provide opportunities for them to develop, practice, and grow.

***Say Yes to Neighbor***

Local churches should make space for high school students to discern and live into their God-given gifts, dreams, and calling. How is God gifting and calling the youth in your local church and community? How will you discern this? Youth see listening as essential to loving neighbor.

One student shared, “I learned to love the people who need it. You can serve people by just engaging in conversations with them” (2019.4AO). Engage in conversations with young people about what God is doing in their lives. YBL participants noted that these discussions with mentors and local church leaders were what helped them to discover their personal calling and how to implement that calling in their current contexts. Christian community was crucial to students developing this understanding and being offered opportunities for and support when applying their gifts.

YBL’s findings regarding the significance of listening resonate with Future of Faith’s *Sacred Listening* study<sup>i</sup>, which found that 67% of the U.S. teenagers they surveyed said, “I grow in my faith and spirituality when someone listens to me talk about my beliefs without judgement.” Further, 70% agree, “I trust someone more when they listen and follow up rather than simply sharing their own thoughts,” and 71% express, “Being listened to has deepened my own faith.” Listening is clearly vital in young people’s spiritual formation, so adults should commit to loving through listening.

Fuller Youth Institute’s (FYI) research echoes the importance of listening. *The FYI Report on Gen Alpha & Faith* reports, “When we asked what makes an adult trustworthy, teens said

someone who listens without judging.”<sup>ii</sup> The report also finds that young people are looking for trustworthy adults as mentors and guides. These findings pair well with what we found at YBL.

Listening to students shows them the value that Christian adults see in them and the work God is doing in their lives. YBL staff intentionally implemented listening as part of creating a Culture of Yes by inviting students, such as Leadership Fellows, into visioning and decision-making conversations and by adopting the specific ideas they had about ministry. In addition to offering these invitations and applications, adults in local churches can model for students what it looks like to listen well so that students can practice listening with others in their communities.

### ***Say Yes to Communal Participation***

Finally, participate in God’s mission to culture together. Serve local communities alongside young people. YBL students consistently spoke highly of their relationships with their mentors and congregations, who helped them plan and implement their ministry projects in their local contexts.

I have partnered with my youth pastor and he has agreed to help me start the project up and advertise it to the youth group. He will also be there to help with anything that might go wrong or if a student asks for prayer about a serious matter and he believes he needs to step in and have a conversation with that person. My mentor has also agreed to help with any questions I have or any advice that might be helpful in this process. (2018.M1.E)

It is important to set an environment for communal participation. As mentioned earlier, YBL starts this during the orientation session. Be a safe place for students to ask questions, pray with each other and with adults, reflect on how they are growing, and communally engage in abundant life in Christ. One student expressed that before their ministry project they were not aware of this environment in their local church: “I didn’t have personal connections to my fellow church members before this project and I didn’t even know that my friends were interested in

helping the community the same way I was. By branching out and sharing what I believed, I was able to grow a strong network of Christians” (2018.M3.K). Adults in Christian community should take this step to branch out to high school students in their local churches and contexts. Another student conveyed how much it meant to them when adults took this step:

I am also seeing how God is working throughout my church. As my project is just starting off, members of my church have already began [*sic*] to bring in items that are needed. I have contacted a lady at the local elementary who has sent a list and has said that any donation would be very appreciated. Within about 2 weeks of presenting my project to my church and sharing the items most needed, my church family has already begun to show support, willingness, and God’s love through bringing in school supplies. (2019.M1.U)

Christian organizations that work with youth, especially local churches, should collaborate in God’s relational mission, loving, serving, and listening to neighbors in their contexts, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

## **Conclusion**

Where many American high school students are being told “no” to meaningful leadership in their churches and communities, Youth Becoming Leaders: High School Christian Leadership and Global Transformation Institute sets a prime example of how to create a Culture of Yes. Students who participate in the Institute value the role of the Christian community, especially the role of the local church, in forming and fulfilling personal calling and God’s mission to culture. Moreover, they say “yes” to God and God’s mission, say “yes” to loving their neighbor and making space for others, and say “yes” to communal participation in God’s mission and calling for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Local churches, especially, and other organizations that work with youth should empower young people in Christian leadership by also creating a Culture of Yes.

---

<sup>i</sup> Future of Faith, *Sacred Listening, Deeper Faith: A Research-Driven Approach*, Future of Faith, 2025, [futureoffaith.org](https://futureoffaith.org).

<sup>ii</sup> Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and LaTasha Nesbitt, *The FYI Report on Gen Alph & Faith*, Fuller Youth Institute, 2026.