**Hope and Healing Through Future-Focused Churches**

Jake Mulder, PhD, Assistant Chief of Leadership Formation—Fuller Seminary

**Abstract**

Our previous research and resources at the Fuller Youth Institute have largely focused on *what* changes may be needed in youth ministry. Over the past decade, we have led yearlong cohorts with over 1,000 churches and ministries to understand *how* congregations can make the necessary changes. We then conducted qualitative interviews with 45 leaders from 23 of those churches to better understand the change process.

We identified congregations that make lasting changes toward a more vibrant and vital future embrace a future-focused perspective and give attention to four zones that seem important to pursue faithful and effective change:

* HERE: Where are we now, and why are we here?
* THERE: Where is God leading us?
* WHO: Who are the people in our congregation (or ministry) and wider community whose unique perspectives and gifts must shape this effort?
* HOW: What is our next faithful step, and how might we move into a more faithful future?

Future-focused churches are needed to empathize with and step into the areas in which today’s students are hurting, and embody the good news of Jesus to bring hope and healing.

*Note portions of this paper are adapted and excerpted from two sources. The first is Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Raymond Chang, Future-Focused Church: Leading Through Change, Engaging the Next Generation, and Building a More Diverse Tomorrow (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2025). The second is Jake Mulder, “Faithful and Effective: Leading Effective Changes in US Congregations.” PhD Diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2025.*

**Introduction:**

Change is, paradoxically, both incredibly important and decidedly difficult. Change is hard enough when it involves shifts for an individual. The complexity of the task often increases when a group of people are assembled in a larger organization with a history, culture, and established systems and structures. While many organizations struggle to change, churches seem to warrant unique considerations. Some of these considerations could possibly serve as strong barriers to change, including commitments to timeless theological or biblical truths, fidelity to tradition, composition as a volunteer-run organization, and ministries that intentionally provide space for people to find comfort and healing. Many churches, particularly established congregations in the United States, struggle with change. In the midst of this inertia, however, some congregations are thriving in their ability to adapt. Why do some churches struggle with change, some succeed, and how can churches that struggle faithfully and effectively implement adaptive changes?

Past research and published works from the Fuller Youth Institute have focused primarily on *what* changes churches might make to be more effective in their ministry with teenagers and young adults.[[1]](#footnote-1) Resulting resources and training focused on helping teenagers develop faith that last beyond high school, how churches can shift their overall culture to better involve and retain young people, how parents and caring adults can grow with their children through the emerging adult years, and how faith communities can respond to the big questions young people are asking. Through our coaching and training with church leaders, we found that additional research and resources were needed on *how* to lead change healthy change in congregations that seek greater effectiveness with young people. This paper provides an overview of the process that Kara Powell, Raymond Chang, and I engaged to approach this topic, as well as an overview of key findings—which are fully outlined in the recently-released book *Future-Focused Church*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For Christians and congregations who profess to embody the ministry of Jesus, we believe change is not optional. The invitation of Jesus is fundamentally an invitation to change, as evidenced by his first words in the Gospel of Mark (1:15), “‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”[[3]](#footnote-3)Just as the gospel of Jesus has transformed the lives of countless individuals and families, we contend churches that carry on the work of Jesus should be among the most faithful and effective organizations on the planet in their commitment and ability to change. Further, we contend that these churches can serve as beacons of Christ’s hope and healing.

Change is often a prominent theme in Jesus’ ministry and the work of the early church. It seems particularly significant that Jesus’ first recorded words in the book of Mark (above) are a clear call for people to do something different than they were previously doing. While his statement is far from an extended sermon or complex argument, it offers a helpful starting point for Christians and church leaders today who also desire to implement change. Jesus begins with a sense of urgency, stating that “the time has come.” He offers an alternate view of reality that challenges people’s existing understanding, claiming “the kingdom of God has come near.” He reinforces the need to change as a message of hope and possibility, by offering it as “good news.” And he invites people to take a different approach to their thinking and action by telling them to “repent and believe.”

Despite Jesus’ focus on change, as well as the need for many congregations today to make both small and large changes, lasting change often remains elusive. As a classic *Harvard Business Review* article “Cracking the Code of Change” explains, “Despite some individual successes…change remains difficult to pull off, and few companies manage the process as well as they would like…the brutal fact is that about 70 percent of all change initiatives fail.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In our research, we encountered leaders like Vince, a senior pastor of a small rural congregation in the Mainline tradition, who shared, “I know God has called me to this work and this church. But I honestly don’t know that our discipleship efforts in the last decade have made a tangible difference. People seem more divided than ever. Maybe it’s time for me to get out of the way and let someone younger and more relevant take over.”

Marissa, a youth leader in a large innovative parachurch ministry, lamented, “I’m the only person of color leading at my level in our area, and my organization seems to expect me alone to guide us into a more diverse future. I believe in where we’re going, but I’m mentally and physically exhausted.” Luis, a board member of a midsized, highly diverse urban congregation, reflected, “I want to help our pastors and church leadership move forward, but I’m not always sure the best way to help. In my day job, we’d simply fire people who aren’t on board with the future. But our church has so many people who like the way things have been and don’t seem to want to change.”

While the three of us have been in church and ministry leadership collectively for nearly seventy-five years, in this last decade we’ve encountered more church and ministry leaders (like Vince, Marisa, and Luis) who are trying harder yet seeing diminishing results. The data paints a picture of US Christian leaders who are dedicated yet drained. Two-thirds of pastors in one study named 2020 (the first year of the pandemic in the US) as their toughest year in ministry ever.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to 2023 data from the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) multi-year study, 53 percent of religious leaders have seriously considered leaving pastoral ministry, up from an already astonishing 37 percent in 2020.[[6]](#footnote-6) Pastors who are younger, female, part-time, or bivocational are most likely to consider quitting.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Many of today’s leaders oversee churches or parishes that are shrinking in size, as median worship has declined from 137 people in 2000 to 75 in 2023.[[8]](#footnote-8) The decline in the number of Christians in the US is equally apparent. In 2007, 78 percent of the US adult population identified as Christian. That figure dropped to 63 percent in 2021[[9]](#footnote-9) and is projected by the Pew Research Center to drop below 50 percent by 2070.[[10]](#footnote-10) Further, between 2007 to 2021, the number of adults who identify as religious “nones” (meaning they profess to be atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”) has grown from 16 percent to 29 percent. This means almost one in three US adults identify as religiously unaffiliated, compared with one in twenty in 1972.[[11]](#footnote-11) This data provides the backdrop for which we have pursued our research on how congregations can pursue change.

**Research Method:**

Our process for understanding how churches can faithfully and effectively change relied on three primary sources: semi-structured qualitative interviews on congregational change; Fuller Youth Institute Training Cohorts; and our combined years of scholarship and speaking, consulting, and coaching with congregations. We understand this multi-method approach as a *practical theology process*, which John Swinton, a practical theology scholar at King’s College at the University of Aberdeen, describes as “critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to, and for the world.”[[12]](#footnote-12) By employing a practical theology approach, we not only report on the results of the interview research (which we will explain below) but also place these findings in conversation with our training experience, literature on organizational change, Scripture, and theology in order to hopefully and prayerfully strengthen the practices of the church in this season.

*Qualitative Interviews on Congregational Change*

We began our congregational change interviews in early 2020. Participants included forty-five congregational leaders from twenty-three churches that had previously participated in a one- to two-year FYI Training Cohort. During these cohorts, we walked alongside these congregations to help them discern *what* should change in their congregation as well as the initial steps for *how* to implement those shifts. Typically occurring one to five years after a church completed the cohort, interviews were especially focused on understanding how the church’s change efforts developed in the year(s) following the cohort.

Tyler Greenway (FYI’s research director at the time and now associate professor of psychology at Calvin University) assisted in the design of the research method. Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Ray Chang conducted interviews, along with Jane Hong-Guzmán de León and Patrick Jacques. Drawing on an internal database of over one thousand congregations that had completed an FYI Training Cohort, we sought an interview sample that represented diversity of congregational race/ethnicity, church size, denomination, and geography. Once a church was contacted and agreed to participate, a church point leader nominated up to four congregational leaders to participate in separate interviews (most often two leaders with knowledge of the young people’s ministries and two senior leaders with knowledge of the church’s overall activities). Interview participants received a $35 Amazon.com electronic gift card as compensation for the interview.

Prior to the interview, participants completed a short survey that provided demographic and other contextual data about the church. Interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes, were conducted by phone, and were recorded, transcribed, and coded. All interviews were completed by August 2023. The types of questions in the interview included the following:

• What have been the top three or four goals or areas of focus for your ministry area or overall church to bring about change following the cohort? How effective have you been in those efforts?

• Reflecting on the changes that have taken place in your church, to what do you attribute these changes? What has contributed most to those changes taking place?

• What have been the biggest barriers to change in your overall church or ministry area?

• How has your church relied upon God’s agency in the change process, or how has the Holy Spirit been active in your efforts?

• How would you say the unique culture of your congregation (such as denomination, race/ethnicity, or geographic location) has influenced your church’s change efforts?

• To what extent would you say the changes that have taken place were planned or intentional, and to what extent have they been unplanned or more reactionary (or perhaps somewhere in between)?

• What advice might you offer to another church that is trying to make positive changes in their ministry with young people?

While we conducted a few interviews in early 2020, the research process was significantly delayed by the onset of the pandemic. We found congregational leaders were occupied with responding to the impact of the pandemic on their congregations and generally lacked the time and capacity to reflect on current or past changes. We resumed regular interviews in early 2022. While the pandemic admittedly forced leaders to respond to significant change, we were grateful for the opportunity to be immersed in leaders’ stories and experiences immediately following such a disruptive season. We encouraged participants to reflect on the changes before, during, and after the pandemic in order to provide a wider view of change. Some pastors mentioned COVID-19 had accelerated positive change, and others commented that it had stalled their progress.

When we had conducted just over half of the interviews, Jake Mulder and Yulee Lee (FYI’s senior director of staff and culture at the time) hosted a two-day in-person research gathering of approximately ten FYI staff members and research assistants to discuss implications emerging from the research. Each team member was assigned two or three de-identified interviews to read carefully before the gathering, noting key themes, important stories and quotes, and other observations. During the gathering, the team identified the most prominent themes that supported changes in the churches, as well as barriers to change.

We view the field of congregational change, particularly its intersection with young people, to be empirically understudied, and therefore view our research as exploratory. We utilized a *grounded theory approach*, which mixed methods researcher John W. Creswell describes as “a qualitative strategy in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Based on feedback we received on our study design from qualitative researchers (particularly Jenny Pak of Fuller’s School of Psychology & Marriage and Family Therapy), we also incorporated specific elements of narrative analysis so that the important stories of individuals and congregations were not lost in the theories developed.

While we intended to interview two participants from each congregation, in some cases (especially in smaller churches or those that had experienced significant transition) this was not possible. In the end, we interviewed forty-five church leaders from twenty-three churches. Brief profiles of the diverse churches in our research included:

• A church plant in California integrating spiritual formation, justice, and community development.

• A Black, multisite, megachurch with a hundred-year history that presses toward holistic discipleship.

• A small, rural, predominantly White congregation in the Pacific Northwest that meets for Sabbath on Saturday and is growing quickly in its engagement of young adults.

• A midsized, multiethnic, Mainline, urban congregation on the East Coast with a rich history of national and global influence.

• A predominantly Chinese-immigrant church learning new ways to engage with and serve the surrounding neighborhood.

• A nondenominational church in the Midwest that pioneered and trained thousands of other churches in innovative approaches to ministry.

• A fast-growing, bilingual, Latina/o congregation in the South that emphasizes the importance of church as family.

In terms of more detailed demographics of the participating congregations, eighteen were located in the United States, two in Australia, two in Scotland, and one in Hong Kong. The ethnic diversity included four churches that identified as “Mostly Asian or Asian American,” one church that identified as “Mostly Black or African American,” nine churches that identified as “Mostly White,” and nine churches that identified as “Multiracial or Multiethnic.” Churches ranged in number of total active participants during an average week, including 100 or fewer (three churches), 101–250 (eight churches), 251–500 (three churches), 501–1,000 (two churches), 1,001–3,000 (four churches), and over 3,000 (three churches). Our sample included one church that identified from each of the following denominations: American Baptist USA, Church of Christ, Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Church of the Nazarene, United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and Presbyterian Church USA. In addition, one church had dual affiliation in the Reformed Church of America and United Church of Christ, two identified as Church of Scotland, five were Seventh-day Adventist, and seven identified as nondenominational. Finally, in terms of socioeconomic status, eight churches were primarily upper-middle class, eleven churches were primarily middle class, and four were primarily lower-middle class.

Regarding demographics of the leaders participating in the interviews, three leaders elected not to provide detailed demographic information. Ethnic diversity of the forty-two respondents who provided demographic information included eleven respondents who identified as “Asian or Asian American,” five who identified as “Black or African American,” one who identified as “Latina/o or Hispanic,” and twenty-five who identified as “White.” Twenty-seven identified as male, and fifteen identified as female. Regarding age of respondents, four were ages 18–34, seventeen were ages 36–46, ten were ages 47–54, ten were ages 55–63, and one was age 74.

We recognize one limitation of this research is the lower participation of Latina/o leaders and churches, and are making efforts in our future research and training to involve more Latina/o leaders and churches.

*Fuller Youth Institute Church Training Cohorts*

For over fifteen years, FYI staff have been closely engaged in congregational change processes through our cohort training. Based on the book *Sticky Faith*,we launched a Sticky Faith Cohort process that invited teams of approximately four people per church from around twenty-five churches (typically around one hundred people total) to journey through a yearlong church training process. This training process included church leaders making two three-day trips to Fuller’s Pasadena, California, campus for in-person summits, along with personalized coaching, bimonthly webinars, and the creation of an action plan.

In 2016, FYI launched a second cohort process based on the book *Growing Young*. The focus of this Growing Young Cohort was shifting a church’s overall culture to be more welcoming and place greater priority on teenagers and young adults. The generally yearlong Growing Young Cohort followed a similar design as the Sticky Faith Cohort, most often consisting of two in-person summits, coaching, webinars, and the development of an action plan. We conducted one to two of these cohorts annually based in Pasadena, as well as several cohorts in partnership with denominations based regionally—including Michigan, North Carolina, Indiana, Washington State, Oregon, Texas, Washington DC, Australia, and Scotland, as well as virtually. The Fuller Youth Institute has also led cohort-based training on innovation, young adult ministry, and other pressing ministry topics over the past several years. In total, we have had over one thousand churches complete cohort-based training that lasts one to two years.

In their past and current roles with FYI, Kara Powell and Jake Mulder have provided key leadership for these cohort training processes, along with other FYI leaders and staff. The cohort process involves in-depth coaching, for which both Kara and Jake have served with dozens of churches, as well as spending time with the churches in-person during the summits. Cohort churches also complete an initial assessment with quantitative and qualitative responses, as well as a midway assessment survey and post-cohort survey. We have analyzed these responses for the book, as well as drawn on our experiences and interactions with these churches for our future-focused themes, stories, ideas, and examples.

*Academic Experience and Other Work with Congregations*

In addition to our empirical research with congregations and experience in training churches through Fuller Youth Institute Cohorts, we drew the material for this book from our other academic work and our experience speaking to, coaching, and consulting with congregations and leaders. Kara Powell’s PhD is in practical theology, and she regularly speaks to tens of thousands of church leaders per year. Jake Mulder recently completed his PhD in practical theology with a focus in congregational change. Much of the literature review for Jake’s doctoral dissertation, including its focus on organizational and congregational change literature, served as source material for this book. Ray Chang is pursuing a PhD in higher education with a focus on the impact of racial climate and culture on spirituality within Christian institutions, especially as it pertains to racialized minorities, and much of his literature review has also informed the source material for this book. Jake and Ray also speak regularly to Christian leaders and coach and consult with several congregations and ministry organizations per year.

While we have done our best to be faithful and rigorous in our research and the content of this article, we are aware that there is much left to learn about how to effectively guide churches through change. We’re also aware that our social locations and theological commitments as authors are assets in this work but also present limitations, as we have been shaped by our various contexts—and we do not assume our perspectives should be normative or immediately applicable to all traditions and cultures. Our hope and prayer is that our research and writing is helpful to many congregations and leaders who are dedicated yet drained and need research-based, accessible tools they can implement now.

**Key Findings:**

Following our research, we’re optimistic about the potential for churches to pursue faithful and effective changes and the future of local churches in their ministries with young people. Not because we’re ignorant of the challenges churches face but because we believe God is bigger than those challenges. We believe God invites us to be a people of hope—hope that is grounded in the fact that God is a God of resurrection who makes things new, brings life out of death, and shines light in darkness. Our research has led us to ask--what if we’re not merely in the midst of a decline but also an era of reimagining and renewal? While the gospel *message* never changes, the specific *methods* we utilize deserve our ongoing reimagination.[[14]](#footnote-14)

While we’re hopeful, we didn’t discover an easy option, fast path, magic wand, or quick fix that immediately enables churches to move forward. We believe this is a season in which leaders need to attend to what the Holy Spirit is doing in new ways and in local contexts and to develop skills and systems for ongoing adaptation. While change and moving into the future aren’t *easy* in this reality, there are insights and lessons that can make them *easier*.

Organizational change experts Charles O’Reilly and Michael Tushman state that, at a basic level, “Managing change involves moving an organization from its current state to its desired future state through a transition period.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In other words, change involves people journeying from HERE to THERE*.*

**Figure 1:**



HERE represents where a church is now. This includes its physical location as well as other elements that make up the current reality of the church—its people, culture, current sense of life and vitality, resources, infrastructure, programs, and more. THERE represents the desired future reality or destination. If leaders were to picture their church six months, six years, or sixty years from now, this is what they want their church to be doing or what they might want it to look like. WHO represents the people who will be part of the journey. In most churches, this encompasses the overall congregation, key leaders (such as a board, staff, or elders), attendees across generations and at various levels of congregational leadership, as well as people who are not yet part of the church but whom the church hopes to engage. HOW is the path to navigate between where the church is now and where the church hopes to be in the future. Together, these four zones construct the church’s *map of change*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

We find leaders use maps to navigate frequently in their daily life. To arrive at an unfamiliar destination, they may rely on a GPS or digital map to anticipate the terrain and know when to make a turn. Having a map makes it much more likely someone will arrive at their desired destination. While simply having the map doesn’t immediately solve the leaders’ problems, constructing the map allows them to invest their limited time in the right places to increase the likelihood of change.

In the recently published book *Future-Focused Church*, we outline in greater detail how leaders can construct such a map for change in their congregation as well as how to navigate the journey ahead. The process of constructing this map comes with several important considerations. First, each of the zones can be explored through guiding questions, as outlined in Figure 2: [[17]](#footnote-17)

**Figure 2:**



Second, leaders need to be clear about both where they are starting from and where they are headed before they chart their course. We are often surprised by how often church leaders engage in the HOW without being mindful about their HERE or THERE. Instead, we often found that when leaders take time to clarify their HERE and THERE, God often illuminates HOW they might navigate the journey. While it’s our responsibility as Christian leaders to make wise plans, God is the one who ultimately establishes (or changes) those plans through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Third, we found that change is difficult enough if leaders were making decisions on their own, but they also need to be clear about WHO is on the journey with them. Taking into account the unique people, community, history, and culture of their congregation means no two church journeys will be exactly the same. Rather than following a formula or engaging in well-ordered and consistent steps, we find the image of the map helpful because leading complex change often involves engaging in both/and thinking rather than either/or thinking. This is because the work of leading culture change in the church is often not about finding just the right solution—but about managing tensions.

Fourth, we found that change isn’t as simple as moving from one static starting point to one static future destination. Our world and church leadership are dynamic, and there could be multiple potential future realities for a church. That’s why the path has highs, lows, and multiple twists and turns. That is also why we’ve added this second diagram. Pastoral leaders need to prepare for, and be able to pivot into, more than one potential future.

**Figure 3:**



*Future-Focused Churches Lead Toward Hope and Healing*

Reflecting on our collective research, we came to describe churches that were able to faithfully and effectively lead change as a Future-Focused Church, which we define as *a group of Jesus followers who seek God’s direction* *together—especially in relationally discipling young people, modeling* *kingdom diversity, and tangibly loving our neighbors.* We use “a group of Jesus followers,” because at its most basic level, we understanda church to be not merely a building but a people whoregularly gather in Jesus’ name (Matt. 18:20). We use “who seek God’s direction together,” because while we encourage leaders to listen to good research and think strategically aboutthe future of their church, this is ultimately about followingwhere God is leading.

The second half of the definition highlights what we call the *3 Checkpoints*, which are *intentional points on the journey that congregations need to pass through on the way to their future THERE.* We believe these 3 Checkpoints reflect values outlined in Scripture, offer the best hope for a church’s culture, are grounded in recent research, and have disproportionate importance given the dynamics of US churches and our world today.

We emphasize the first checkpoint of *relationally discipling young people* because while the invitation of the gospel is for all people (of every age, racial and ethnic background, gender, and culture), we believe there is no question more pressing than how congregations and parishes will form the faith of young people. Unfortunately, much of the data about young people and faith feels more like bad news than good news. According to the Pinetops Foundation’s data-driven projections, over one million US Christian young people are likely to disaffiliate from Christianity annually.[[18]](#footnote-18) By 2050, between thirty-five and fifty million youth are projected to leave the Christian faith. In addition, it’s undeniable that churches are also aging. On average, one-third (33 percent) of congregants are 65 or older; that age group represents 17 percent of the general US population. Those ages 18–34 represent 14 percent of congregants and 23 percent of the US population. More encouragingly, those ages 13–17 represent 9 percent of churchgoers and 7 percent of the general population.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A particular challenge in engaging a younger generation is that they’re also experiencing historic mental health challenges. Clinical-level depression in teens and young adults more than doubled between 2011 and 2021; the teen suicide rate also more than doubled between 2007 and 2019.[[20]](#footnote-20) That’s part of why one of three adjectives used by the Fuller Youth Institute to describe today’s young people is *anxious*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The second checkpoint is *modeling kingdom diversity.* In addition to welcoming all generations, Future-Focused Churches pursue a culture that embraces all ethnicities and races. Some forms of prioritizing diversity are often perceived or presented as part of a “partisan” or “ideological” agenda. But Scripture shows us that pursuing loving relationships with those who look or experience the world differently than we do while working toward the flourishing of all is first and foremost a biblical mandate (Jer. 29:7; 1 Cor. 12:12–14; Eph. 2:11–22). In the midst of today’s politicized and polarized culture, we celebrate our vibrant variety as part of God’s agenda and the pursuit of a diverse and just community as a kingdom pursuit.

Aligning with the vision in Revelation 7:9 of the future church representing “every nation, tribe, people, and language,” faith communities that prioritize the future can take hope in the ethnic and racial diversity crisscrossing the US today. While about two-thirds of US adults are White, that percentage drops to half for those under eighteen. That means less than 50 percent of US young people today are White and over 50 percent are people of color.[[22]](#footnote-22) Looking ahead a few decades, by 2055, there will be no single racial or ethnic majority in the US.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The third checkpoint is *tangibly loving our neighbors*. As we prioritize and empathize with unique and younger congregants, we’re likely to encounter their passion to tangibly love their neighbors. A recent analysis by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found the social issues that matter most to Gen Z are health care, mental health, higher education, economic security, civic engagement, racial equality, and the environment.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the 2023 Junior Voices Survey, eight- to fourteen-year-olds wished that elected officials would pay most attention to the following issues: (1) gun violence prevention, (2) reducing food insecurity, (3) managing inflation, (4) reducing climate change, (5) promoting educational equity, (6) increasing access to health care, and (7) civil rights for people of different races, genders, and backgrounds.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In our *Growing Young* research on churches that are thriving with teenagers and young adults, a core commitment of outstanding churches is that they aim to *be the best neighbors* in their community—with congregants often echoing Jesus’ language to love our neighbors. Data aside, our hope is that all generations in local churches are committed to a culture that understands that serving God means serving others. We don’t need to look far in Scripture to hear the Old Testament prophets call for justice, Jesus’ statement that the greatest commandments are to love God and *to love your neighbor as yourself* (see Mark 12 or Matt. 22), or Paul’s plea in 2 Corinthians 5 for all believers to carry out the ministry of reconciliation.

When congregations pursue a future-focused orientation, embrace the 3 Checkpoints we’ve outlined above, and take seriously the four zones of congregational change and engage in the process-oriented work of each zone, we see great possibilities for them to faithfully and effectively make changes. These are churches that are able to offer hope and healing to a world that is too often busy, anxious, and hurting. We believe this is when churches are often at their best—by helping all generations together seek reconciliation, righteousness, and shalom.

**Discussion:**

 We offer the research process and overview of key findings above as a framework we have found helpful for churches leaders (including those who work with young people) to consider not just *what* might change, but *how* to lead those changes. We are eager for more churches to empathize with and step into the areas in which today’s young people are hurting, and embody the good news of Jesus to bring hope and healing.

*Questions for discussion: How do the four zones (Here, There, Who, How) and map of change resonate with your context, field of research, and/or lived experience in the church? How is this framework helpful, and/or what questions does it raise for further study? In light of the 3 Checkpoints we suggest, what do you see as the most important checkpoints for churches that want to pursue a more vibrant future?*

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2. Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Raymond Chang, *Future-Focused Church: Leading Through Change, Engaging the Next Generation, and Building a More Diverse Tomorrow* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2025). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Holy Bible*, New International Version, 2011, www.BibleGateway.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nitin Nohria and Michael Beer, “Cracking the Code of Change,” *Harvard Business Review*,May–June 2000, https://hbr.org/2000/05/cracking-the-code-of-change. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations, “Back to Normal? The Mixed Messages of Congregational Recovery Coming Out of the Pandemic,” August 2023, https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Epic-4-2.pdf, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations, “I’m Exhausted All the Time: Exploring the Factors Contributing to Growing Clergy Discontentment,” January 11, 2024, https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Clergy\_Discontentment\_Patterns\_Report-compressed\_2.pdf

This data is similar to a 2022 survey by The Barna Group in which 42 percent of pastors expressed that they had considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year, up from 29 percent the year before. The Barna Group, “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year,” April 27, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations, “Back to Normal?,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Faith Communities Today, “Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview,” accessed June 18, 2024, https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf, 11; Mark Chaves, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins, “Congregations in 21st Century America,” National Congregations Study, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63e5578f1b55bd1c25cf2759/t/6459ac0a20926335c3e8fe85/1683598350842/NCSIV-report.pdf>, 10.

Across traditions, 70 percent of churches and parishes are now composed of less than 100 regular members, and while only 10 percent of churches have over 250 weekly attendees, those churches represent 70 percent of all US faith community attendees; see “Twenty Years of Congregational Change,” 5.

So while the average church size is 65–70 people, most churchgoers actually are involved in larger congregations. The average attendee worships in a congregation of 360 regular participants; see “Congregations in 21st Century America,” 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gregory A. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Pew Research Center, “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” September 13, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, second edition (London: SCM Press, 2016),7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Practically speaking, we see so much hope, optimism, and amazing leadership gifts among all generations, especially younger people who want to see our world changed for Jesus, that we refuse to believe the best days of the church are only behind us. For example, while many young people are leaving institutional aspects of faith, others are retaining elements of spirituality, belief, and religious practice—often starting new or creative faith communities.

For a nuanced treatment on religious disaffiliation, see Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023).

Further, while many capable and optimistic young leaders are in the US, they are also shaping churches in other countries and contributing to the reality that Christianity is growing globally. Many scholars are even suggesting that the centers of Christianity are shifting to Africa, Asia, and Central/South America. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Michael Tushman and Charles O’Reilly, *Winning Through Innovation: A Practical Guide to Leading Organizational Change and Renewal* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997), 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Our approach to congregational change as constructing a map consisting of these four zones is inspired by Richard Osmer’s book *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Osmer conceives of practical theology as an interpretive process for making sense of situations that consists of descriptive-empirical tasks, interpretive tasks, normative tasks, and pragmatic tasks. While our four zones do not exactly replicate Osmer’s tasks, we find his way of thinking about congregational leadership to be essential for today’s churches, and we’ve drawn some aspects of our framework from his writing and research. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. We credit the phrase *the next faithful step* to our Fuller colleague Scott Cormode. For more on this topic, see Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 203–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Pinetops Foundation, *The Great Opportunity*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Faith Communities Today, “Twenty Years of Congregational Change,” 17–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jean M. Twenge, *Generations* (New York: Atria Books, 2023), 396, 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 35; and Kara Powell, Jen Bradbury, and Brad M. Griffin, *Faith Beyond Youth Group: Five Ways to Form Character and Cultivate Lifelong Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023), 34–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nicholas Jones et al., “2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country” U.S. Census Bureau, August 12, 2021, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. D’Vera Cohn and Andrea Caumont, “10 Demographic Trends Shaping the US and the World in 2016,” Pew Research Center, March 31, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/03/31/10-demographic-trends-that-are-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world/. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Social Issues that Matter to Generation Z,” February 14, 2021, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-social-issues>. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “What Kids Think: Junior Voices Survey,” *The Week Junior*, November 10, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)