

Adapting our existing congregations to become more welcoming and affirming for the Millennial generation is an essential priority for our faith. This model and its accompanying self-assessment, based on six stages of development of young adult ministry, can help a congregation discern where it falls in this spectrum and what would be the most effective strategies for moving forward.

The life stage that the UUA terms “young adulthood” is defined as ages 18-35. However, this group is quite diverse, and generally encompasses two themes:

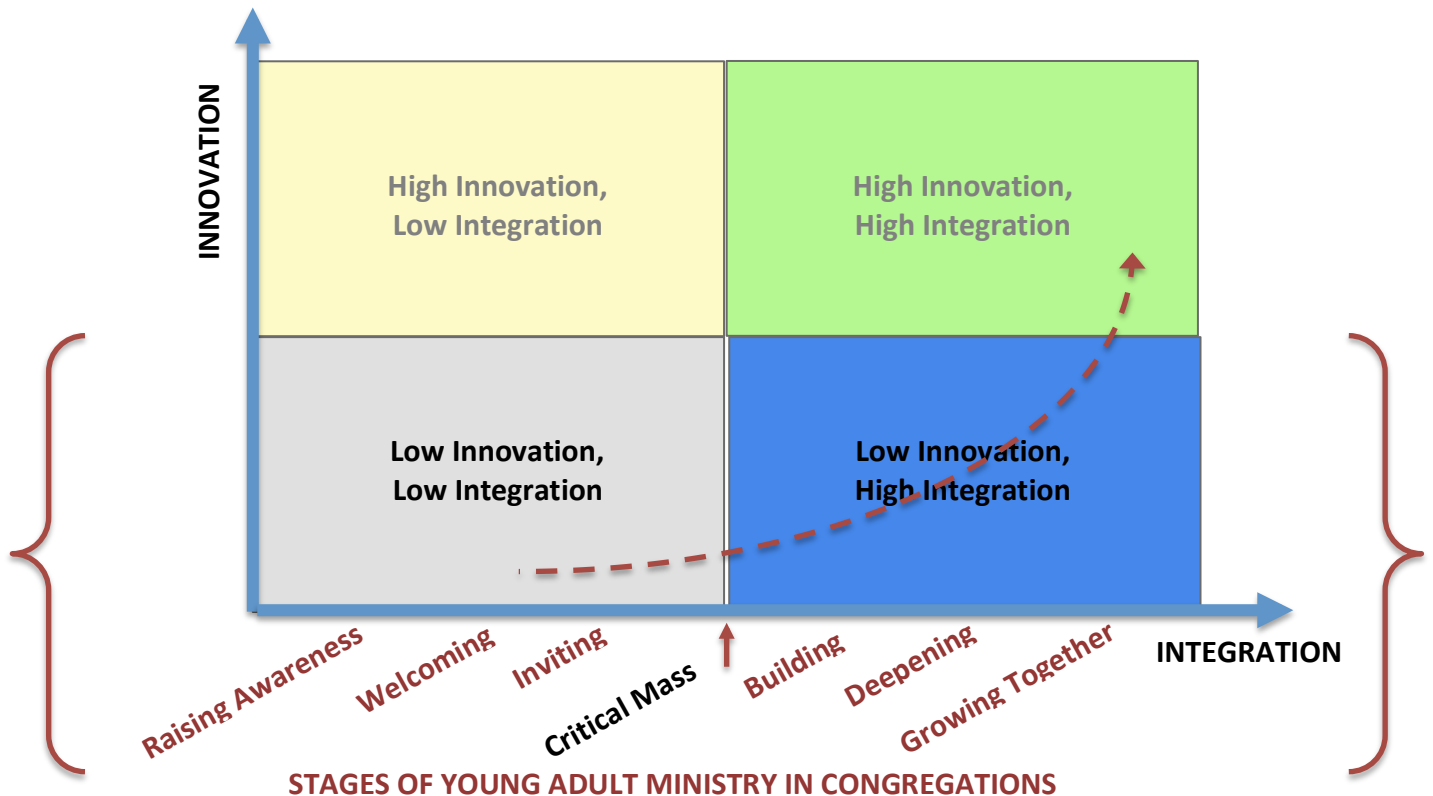
- **Developmental Needs** - These are the common transitions that most people go through at some point in their life. Though these are mostly the same for adults of all ages, traditional markers like marriage, children and home ownership are in flux. If young adults go through these transitions at all, it may be in a different order or on an unpredictable timeframe. However, the desire to connect with peers, the need to tap into interpersonal networks in our congregations, the struggle with discernment over hard decisions related to work, career, partners and families, and other needs persist across life paths and choices.
- **Generational Shifts** – In 2013, the Millennial Generation (born 1982-2000) makes up most of the young adult cohort. There is a wealth of research on the systematic differences between how Millennials interact with religion and the religious practice from previous generations. Though theological beliefs are relatively similar across generations, 33% of Millennials today claim no religious affiliation whatsoever, a dramatic increase in the last two decades. These differences conversations about the future of church, exploring new types of faithful communities, committing to value-based witness and activism, and opportunities for spiritual deepening are where the most energy arises, whereas conversations about who has authority, power, standing and access seem to hold less interest, matching the Millennial emphasis on action over structure.

The stages of this model were created by observing the patterns of growth of various young adult populations and groups within Unitarian Universalist congregations. Despite the fact that every group and congregation is different based on the and what mix of developmental needs and generational shifts of the young adults that are present, these groups share a common trajectory. In deciding how to apply the strategies presented in the model, congregations will need to recognize that young adults range from college students to working adults to young professionals to young families. Each congregation should consider their unique set of young adults involved in determining how to be more supportive and accessible to young adults as members of our faith communities.

The model takes a critical mass approach to young adult ministry, and assumes that to sustain a community that is welcoming and valuable to people of any age there must be an appreciable number of generational peers present. The median age in our congregations is in the mid 40's and getting older, much like many other churches and faiths, and Baby Boomers tend to be the dominant generation in the culture present in

## UUA Stages of Young Adult Ministry for Congregations

our congregation. It is up to the generation at the center of congregational life to make room for other groups of people, because the cohort who exerts the dominant cultural influence is the one who controls communication, resource access, leadership, worship and interpersonal styles. The model is therefore focused on the climate of the congregation as a whole, and benchmarks the stages of development based on observed levels of participation, inclusion and cultural marginalization or normalization.



Congregations take many forms, and it is possible to think of them on the two axes of integration and innovation. In the lower left-hand corner of the graph are congregations that are traditional in religious practice and are culturally dominated by a single group or generation, often the Baby Boom generation in our congregations. Moving up the axis of innovation are congregations that engage in ministry on college campuses, support independent gatherings of young adults in conferences or retreats, or experiment with new types of worship services in different times and venues. The stages of this model are oriented along the axis of innovation, or welcoming young adults into the heart of traditional congregations. Though the strategies for moving to the next stage are based on becoming more integrated, the final stage suggests moving towards high innovation, high integration congregations.

Also, though this model is linear, congregations may move up and down the spectrum as the young adults who are present grow and change. These cycles are normal, and can serve as helpful reminders of how to adapt and revamp a congregation's approach to ministry with younger generations.

### ***Low Integration***

#### **I. Welcoming**

There are not really any young adults in the congregation. If they visit, they do not tend to stay. Other congregations in the area may have vibrant young adult groups, but they don't seem to have found us yet. In the congregation there may be a desire for the involvement of younger generations of adults, but it is hard to know where to start.

#### ***Strategies***

- Increase presence in the broader community, including ensuring that your website is a welcoming "virtual front door. "
- Examine worship- is it authentic and spiritually nourishing?
- Ensure activities of congregational life are accessible.
- Learn about what young adults seek in congregations

#### ***Resources***

- **Social Media 2013** video @ [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUCfFcchw1w>]
- **Ministry in the Age of Collaboration** – 2013 Minns Lecture with Rev. Naomi King and Peter Bowden @ [<http://www.minnslectures.org/2013Series.php>]
- **Creating a Congregation Website** @ [uua.org/communiactions/website](http://uua.org/communiactions/website)
- **Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation** - John Roberto and Mike Hayes @ [[http://www.faithformation2020.net/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/best\\_practices\\_-\\_young\\_adult\\_faith\\_formation.pdf](http://www.faithformation2020.net/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/best_practices_-_young_adult_faith_formation.pdf)]
- **Congregational stories about young adults** @ [uua.org/youngadults](http://uua.org/youngadults)
- **Coffee Hour Caution** poster @ [uua.org/youngadults](http://uua.org/youngadults)
- **Designing Contemporary Congregations**, by Rev. Laurene Beth Bowers
- **52 Ways to Ignite Your Congregation: Practical Hospitality**, by Randy Hammer

#### **II. Inviting**

Young adults are present but on the periphery of our congregation. Some may be involved in aspects of congregational life as religious educators, worship associates, or in justice work. However, they may not be in positions of leadership, and their presence is not much felt within the congregation. If they are in positions of leadership, they may feel isolated or singled out as in their identities as young adults. Some young adults are here now, but if the situation does not change, they might not be soon.

### *Strategies*

- Create opportunities for young adults to build fellowship with one another in an informal setting.
- Investigate “clustering” with young adults at other area churches.
- Ensure that young adults are not being “tokenized” because they are young, but they are wanted because they provide valuable perspectives.
- Ministers and congregational leaders should reach out and build relationships with individual young adults.
- Reach out to young adults in your orbit that may live in another city through care packages.

### *Resources*

- **Doing it Right** – stories of young adult groups in Philadelphia, PA, Dallas, TX, and Columbus, OH @ [blueboat.blogs.uua.org](http://blueboat.blogs.uua.org).
- **Top Ten Tips for Starting a Young Adult Group** @ [uua.org/youngadults](http://uua.org/youngadults)
- **Got a UU Social Life?** post @ [blueboat.blogs.uua.org](http://blueboat.blogs.uua.org)
- **The Latte Factor** by Tim Muldoon @ [\[http://www.faithformation2020.net/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/the\\_latte\\_factor\\_-\\_muldoon.pdf\]](http://www.faithformation2020.net/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/the_latte_factor_-_muldoon.pdf)
- **Big Questions, Worthy Dreams**, by Sharon Daloz Park
- **Care Packages** post @ [blueboat.blogs.uua.org](http://blueboat.blogs.uua.org)

## **CRITICAL MASS – MOVING INTO HIGH INTEGRATION**

### **III. Building**

Young adults are connected to each other in small groups. They may have social events with each other, such as going out to brunch after church. They are starting to look for more intentional and spiritually fulfilling ways of being together. They may have good connections to the rest of the church, but few spiritual connections to each other. Or, conversely, they may have friendly connections with one another but are looking for ways to deepen their spiritual experience.

### *Strategies*

- Create an infrastructure, leadership and expectations for young adults to connect with each other and engage with their faith (staff support is critical to avoid volunteer burnout!).
- Ideas include small group ministry, spiritual practice classes, volunteering, activism, social justice events.
- May require discernment and visioning, possibly between some combination of lay leadership and staff.
- Start with small projects that can build onto bigger successes.

#### *Resources*

- **Small Group Ministry for Young Adults** @ [uua.org/youngadults](http://uua.org/youngadults)
- **Faith Formation 2020 for Millennials**  
[<http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/young-adults2.html>]
- **Five Fixes for Young Adult Groups** @ [uua.org/youngadults](http://uua.org/youngadults)
- **Tapestry of Faith Adult Religious Education Curricula**, particularly - Building the World We Dream About for Young Adults, Spirit in Practice @ [uua.org/tapestry](http://uua.org/tapestry)

#### **IV. Deepening**

Young adults are a strong presence within the congregation, but the congregation has not yet been transformed to being a full multigenerational home. The young adults in this congregation have connections to each other, both socially and spiritually, as well as robust regular activities, but have fewer relationships with other adults in the congregation. Some young adults are likely involved in other aspects of congregational life, and are starting to offer their perspectives on new ways of doing business.

#### *Strategies*

- Develop young adults as lay leaders through informal (mentoring) and formal leadership development
- Invite young adults into positions of leadership (again, formal and informal) in the areas they are passionate about and that use their talents
- Connect young adults to the broader faith and other UU young adults across the Association
- Examine assumptions and practices that may be signaling to young adults that they are not welcome throughout congregational life. Include young adult stories and perspectives in ministry and worship
- Think about institutional and cultural change within the church. Explore new modes of worship and communication

#### *Resources*

- ***The Multigenerational Congregation***, by Gil Rendle
- **Harvest the Power** curriculum for adult lay leaders @ [uua.org/tapestry](http://uua.org/tapestry)
- ***Tribal Church***, by Rev. Carol Howard Merritt
- **Contemporary Worship Resources** @ [uua.org/worship/contemporary](http://uua.org/worship/contemporary)
- ***Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational: Models and Strategies*** @  
[[http://www.faithformation2020.net/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/becoming\\_intentionally\\_intergenerational\\_-\\_roberto.pdf](http://www.faithformation2020.net/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/becoming_intentionally_intergenerational_-_roberto.pdf)]
- **Leadership trainings and denominational gatherings** @ [uua.org/youngadults/events](http://uua.org/youngadults/events)

## **V. Growing Together**

Young adults are fully integrated into the life of the church, and have strong connections with each other. They are involved in both intergenerational and age cohort activities that satisfy spiritual and social needs (mixing and huddling). They are in positions of leadership throughout the church, and their perspectives and voices are valued, not just because of their generational lens, but also because of their leadership abilities. Their leadership is felt in many aspects of congregational life. Young adults are (becoming) a large part of our identity as a faith community, it is truly THEIR congregation, too.

### *Strategies*

- Start asking the question “What’s next”? Explore new modes of spiritual expression and religious community
- Revise leadership and governance processes to become affirming and empowering, rather than bureaucratic and restrictive.
- Build institutions and relationships that encourage leadership development as this group of young adults ages, so that the next group of young adults can be supported in the same way.

### *Resources*

- **Congregations and Beyond** initiative @ [uua.org/vision/beyond](http://uua.org/vision/beyond)
- **Growing Unitarian Universalism** blog @ [growinguu.blogs.uua.org](http://growinguu.blogs.uua.org)
- **“Minimal structure, maximum mission”** blog post by Rev. Joan VanBecelaere @ <http://vitalleaders.blogs.uua.org/leadership-skills/minimal-structure-maximum-mission/>