

## **An Introductory Profile of Congregations with Significant Young Adult Participation**

By Monte Sahlin and David Roozen

The emerging consensus of research shows a growing percentage of young adults are not connected with any religion, although many younger Americans express an interest in spirituality. This reality, along with the general demographic shift toward an older population, rightfully raises concern about young adult participation in religious communities. What is the involvement of young adults in local congregations of all faiths across the United States? And how are faith communities with significant proportion of young adults unique?

The most recent Faith Communities Today national survey of American congregations offers significant insights into this topic. This national survey is a compilation of two random samples of congregations and additional surveys of congregations conducted by 24 collaborating organizations representing 32 of the country's largest religious traditions and denominations. The final dataset included over 11,000 congregations. The common core questionnaire used in these surveys replicates over 150 items from the 2000, 2005 and 2008 surveys, and includes a special section on the 2008 recession. Faith Communities Today is the largest ongoing research project in America focused on local faith communities.

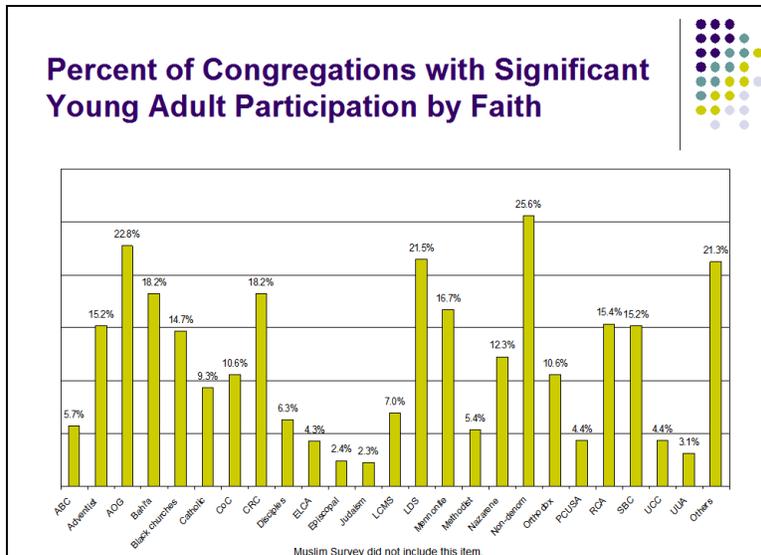
**For purposes of this report a congregation is considered to have significant young adult participation if 21% or more of its participants were 18 to 34 years of age.**

Across all faiths, a total of only 16% of all congregations were in this category. Clearly, the congregations with significant young adult participation highlighted in this paper are not typical of American religious congregations.

### **Religious Groups Vary Significantly**

The percentage of congregations with significant young adult participation varied considerably among religious traditions and denominations. Chart 1 displays the percentage of young adult participation in 25 faith groups (11 are at or above the overall average and 14 are below the average). Young adult involvement in these traditions ranges from 2% at the low end to 26% on the high end. Given this information, it is not be surprising that some faith groups express greater concern about young adult participation than do others.

Chart 1

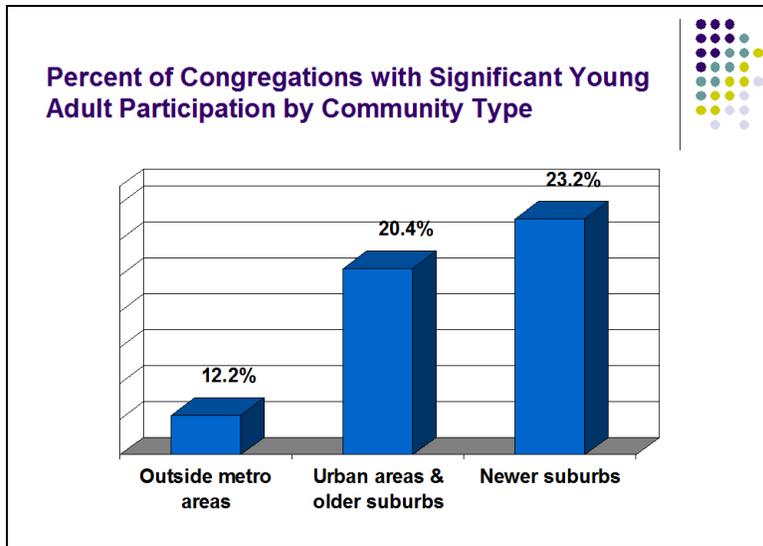


**Certain factors relate significantly to young adult participation.**

*Ethnic Minority Groups* - A total of 23% percent of congregations where most of the members are from ethnic minority groups reported a significant number of young adult participants, while only 13% of congregations with a white majority reported the same.

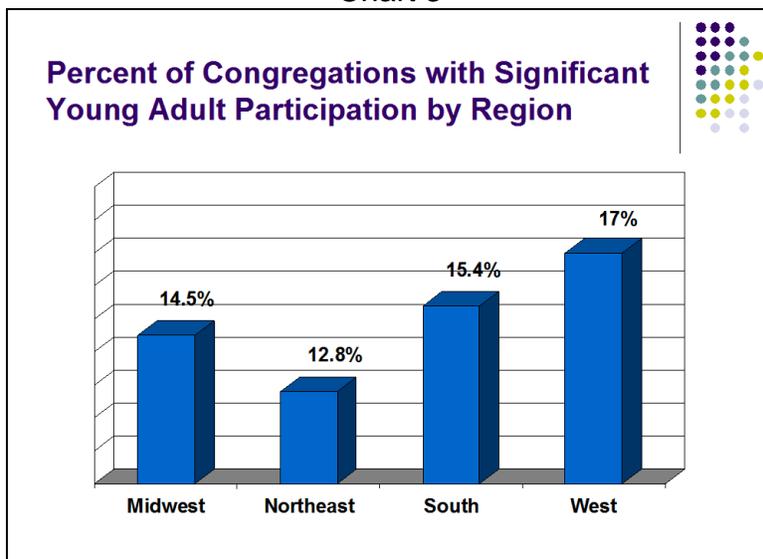
*Suburban Congregations* - There is a similar contrast among congregations located in metropolitan areas and those outside the metropolitan areas. Nearly a quarter of the congregations located in newer suburbs had a significant level of young adult participation, as did one in five of the congregations located in cities and older suburbs. Only 12% of the congregations located in small towns and rural regions outside the metropolitan areas reported the same level of young adult participation.

Chart 2



*Western Region* - There was less variance among the major regions of the United States. The highest proportion of congregations with significant young adult participation was in the west. The South and Midwest were near the national average, while a lower percentage of congregations in the northeast gave the same report.

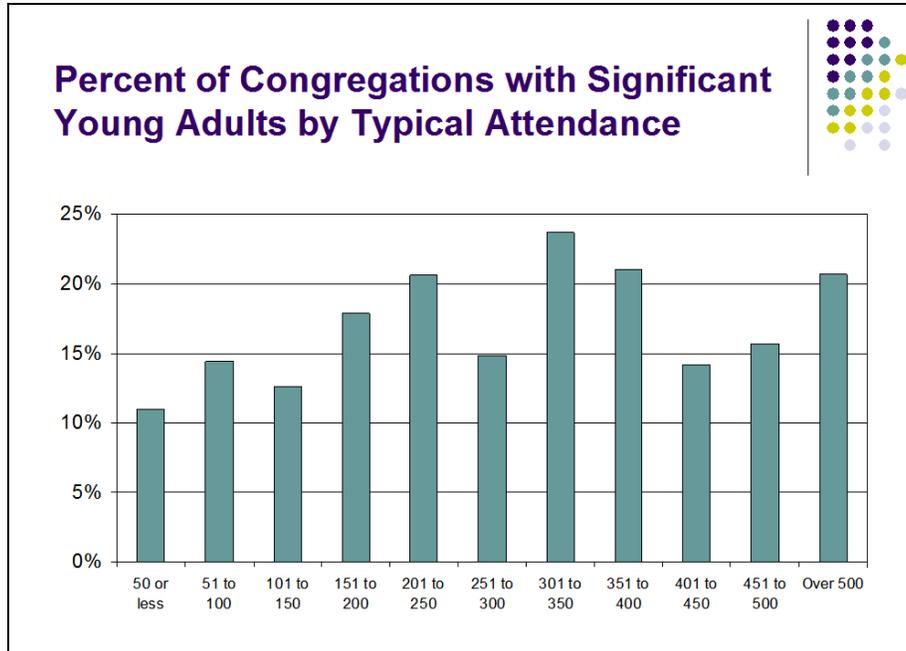
Chart 3



*Larger Congregations* - How young adult participation may correlate with the size of congregation is less clear in these data, although a mid-size range may be optimal to engage young adults. Congregations with a typical weekend attendance of 301 to 350 were more likely to report a significant percentage of young adult participation than were those congregations with either less or greater attendance. Congregations with higher young adult participation than the national average ranged from 151 to 400 in

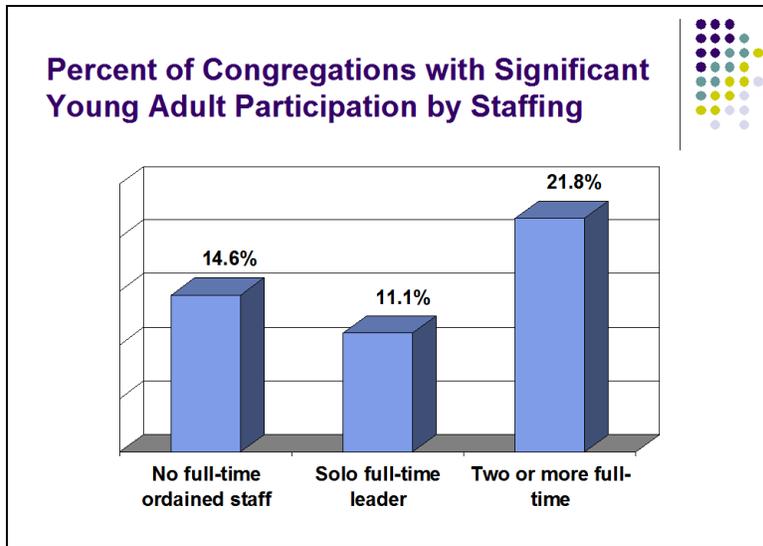
attendance or had a typical attendance of more than 500 people. Small congregations with an attendance of 150 or less were least likely to report a significant level of young adults.

Chart 4



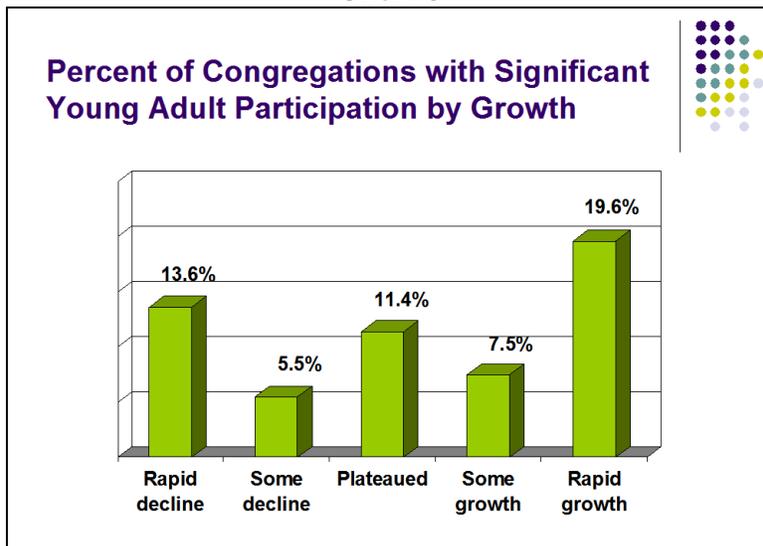
*None or Many Staff* - The correlation between staffing and young adult participation is much clearer. The conventional pattern of staffing for American congregations is to have one full-time clergy person. Congregations with this staffing were least likely to have a significant level of young adult participation. Congregations with no full-time clergy were more likely to have a significant percentage of young adults, although less than average. A significantly higher percentage of congregations with young adults reported having two or more full-time clergy.

Chart 5



*Rapidly Growing* - Congregations with rapid growth (more than 10% over the previous decade) were significantly more likely to report young adult participation. Perhaps surprisingly, those with rapid decline (a loss of more than ten percent in the previous decade) were the next most likely to have a significant level of young adults, although below the overall average. Congregations with modest levels of growth or decline (less than 10% in the previous decade) were least likely to have a significant number of young adults. Does this suggest that there is something about relatively stable-state congregations that is least attractive to young adults?

Chart 6

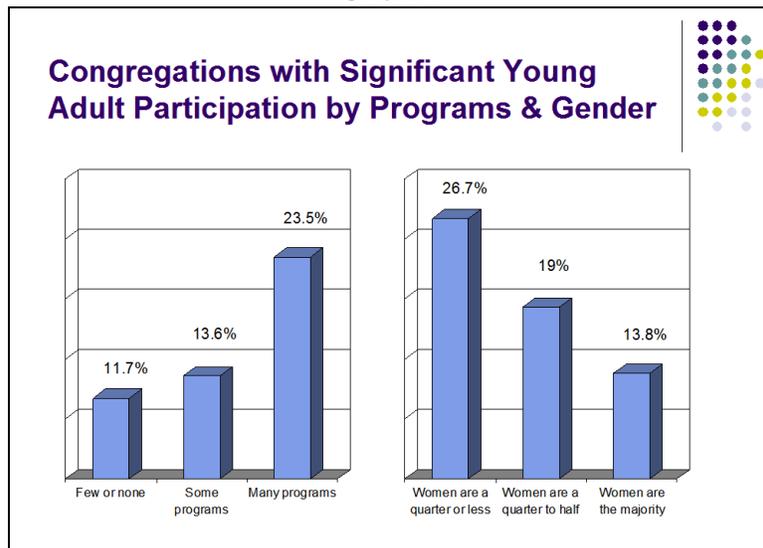


*High Tech* - The use of new technology is clearly correlated with young adult participation. Those congregations that reported major usage of technology were more than twice as likely to have a significant percentage of young adults than those who reported only marginal use. Nearly one in four congregations (24%) were in the first

category and only ten percent were in the second group. A little less than an average percentage of congregations reporting modest use of technology (14%) had significant numbers of young adults.

*Offer More Programs* - There is also a clear correlation between young adult participation and offering a menu of programs and activities. The more programs reported by a congregation the more likely it was that the congregation was among those reporting a significant number of young adults. Congregations reporting many programs were nearly twice as likely to have significant young adult participation as those reporting few or some programs.

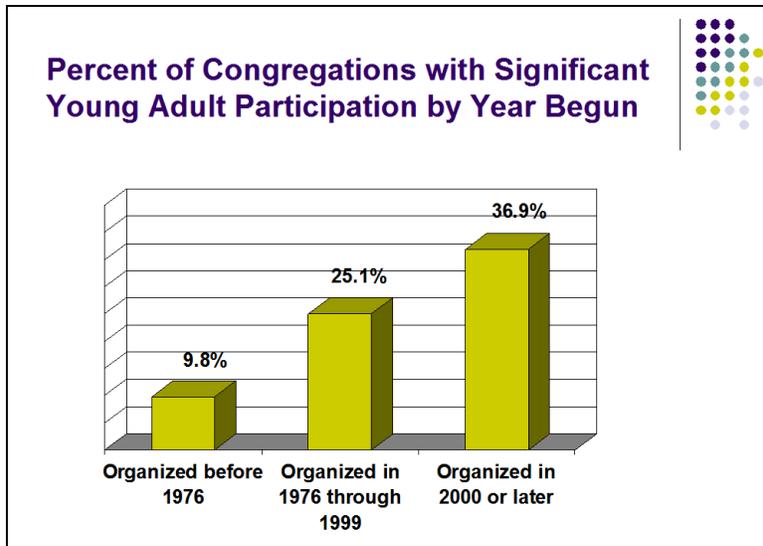
Chart 7



*More Men* - A similar correlation was found with the number of men in the congregation. Those congregations with relatively few women (a quarter or less) were twice as likely to have a significant share of young adults. In other words, the more men there were in a congregation the more likely it was to attract young adults. (These data are also displayed in Chart 7)

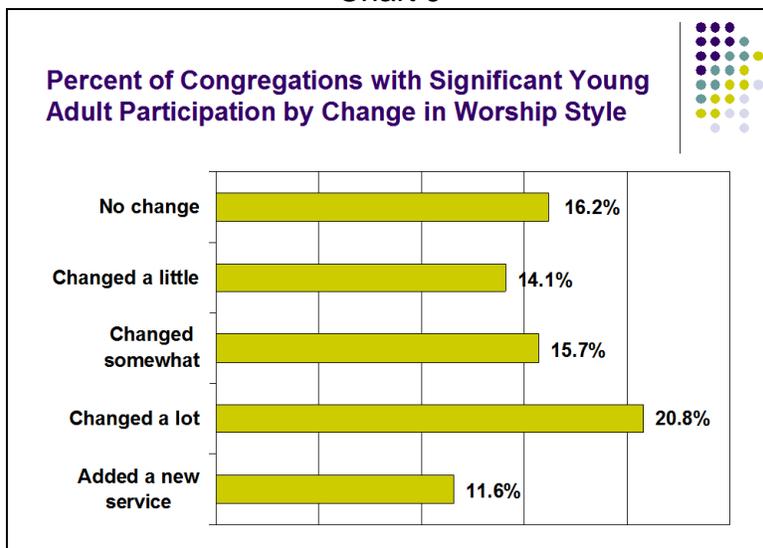
*A Newer Congregation* - One of the strongest correlations in the survey is the relationship between how recently a congregation was begun and the level of young adult participation. New congregations organized in the past decade were more than three times as likely to have a significant number of young adults as those organized before 1976. And faith communities founded from 1976 to 1999 were more than twice as likely to have a significant number of young adults than the older congregations. It is clear that religious organizations need to be planting new congregations for new generations.

Chart 8



*What about Worship?* - Much has been written about attracting young adults by changing worship styles and music, yet the survey does not offer as much evidence as might be expected. Congregations that reported their worship style had "changed a lot" in the previous five years were more likely to have significant young adult participation, but congregations that reported no change were also somewhat more likely to have a significant number of young adults. While the percentage of young adults for those congregations that reported "little" or "some" change in worship style reported only an average level of young adult participation. At least it appears that this concept must be more nuanced than an across-the-board "change your worship principle" for engaging young adults in all faiths and contexts.

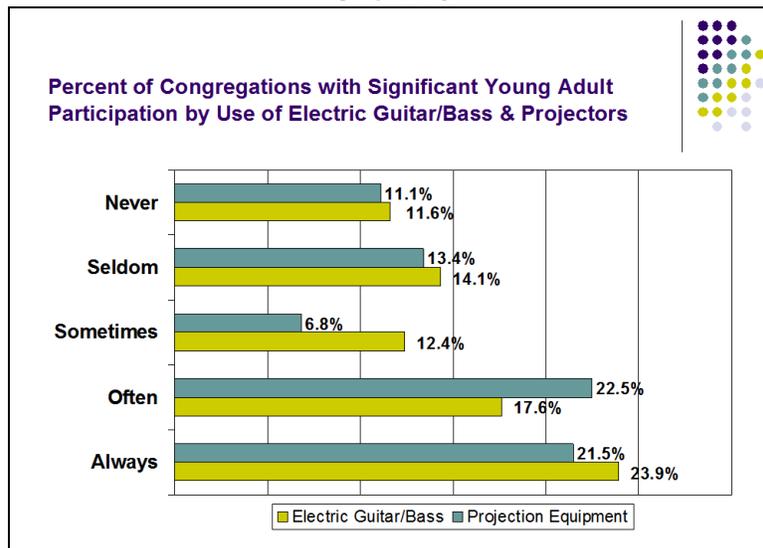
Chart 9



*Electric Guitars and Projection Screens* - The relationship between new worship styles and young adult participation is clearer about the use of the electric guitar or bass and

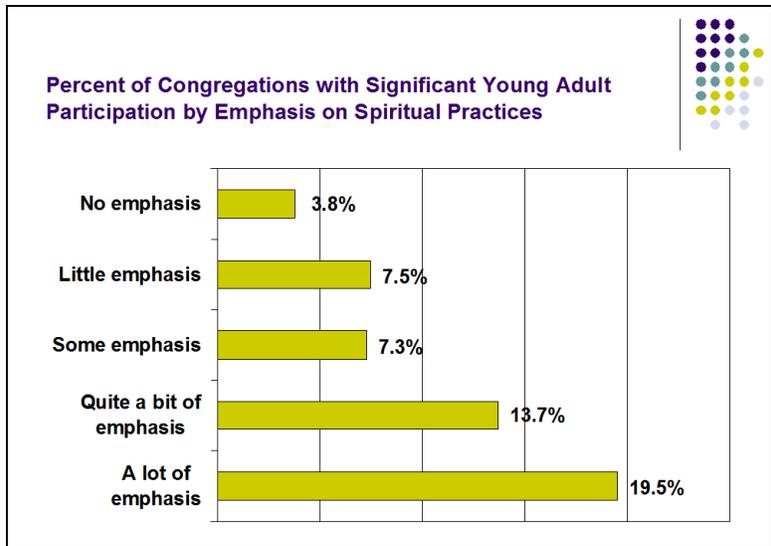
projectors. Congregations that reported using these items in their worship "often" or "always" were about twice as likely as those who never used them to have significant numbers of young adults participating. Using the electric guitar or bass "sometimes" was least likely to attract young adults. Further evidence is found in a combined measure of how often an electric guitar or bass and a drum are used. Those congregations that reported using these musical instruments "always" or "often" were twice as likely to have a significant number of young adults as were congregations that reported using them less often if at all. Is this strong evidence that a contemporary worship style is an important part of engaging young adults, at least in many faith communities?

Chart 10



*Spiritual Practices* - Congregations that emphasize basic spiritual practices are generally more likely to attract young adults. Those congregations that indicated they place "quite a bit" or "a lot" of emphasis on teaching spiritual practices were twice as likely to have a significant number of young adult participants as those who gave the topic only "some" or "little" emphasis. The difference between those congregations that reported "no emphasis" and "a lot" was five times greater. It appears that congregations that teach spiritual practices are much more attractive to young adults.

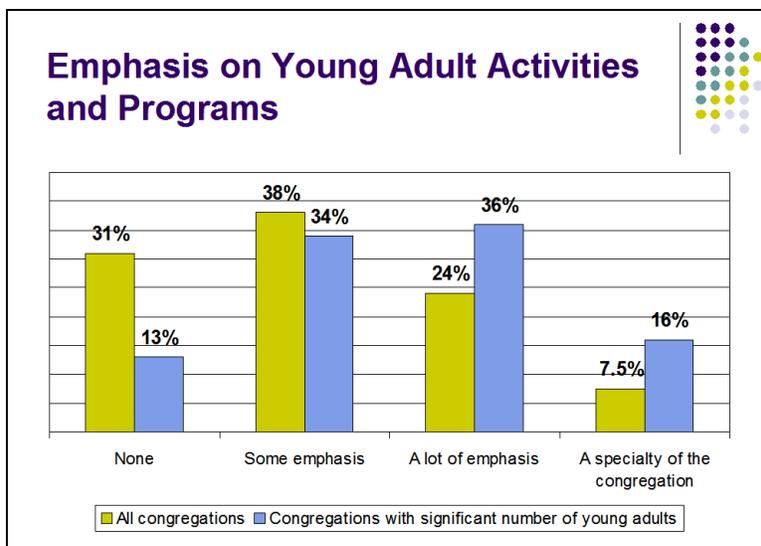
Chart 11



*Spiritual Vitality* - There was also a strong correlation between the spiritual vitality of a congregation and engagement with young adults. Congregations that reported high spiritual vitality were three times as likely to have a significant number of young adults. 21% of those reporting high spiritual vitality also reported significant young adult participation. Among congregations reporting moderate spiritual vitality, 15% also reported significant young adult participation. Only 7% of the congregations reporting low spiritual vitality also reported a significant number of young adult participants

*It Isn't About Your Programs* - If a congregation initiates serious efforts to engage young adults using means appropriate to its faith tradition and context, will that result in attracting a larger proportion of young adults among its regular participants? The survey asked congregations how much emphasis they placed on young adult activities or programs. Overall, nearly a third (31%) reported that they had no such activities, about another third (38%) reported "some emphasis" on young adult activities, one in four (24%) report "a lot of emphasis" on young adult activities and 8% percent said it was "a specialty of the congregation."

Chart 12



*It is About Your Emphasis* - Congregations that reported the greatest emphasis on young adult ministry, were twice as likely to also report engaging a significant number of young adults. Congregations that reported "a lot of emphasis" on young adult activities and programs were also more likely to engage a significant number of young adults, while those that reported only "some emphasis" were less likely to attract young adults. Those congregations that reported no young adult activities were less than half as likely to have a significant number of young adult participants.

### The Need for a More Nuanced Look

When the 2010 survey results were reviewed, the partners in this cooperative research venture suggested the need to look more closely at congregations where an exceptional number of young adults were being engaged. This was deemed essential in order to answer some of the uncertainties noted above and to understand in greater detail how congregations were successfully getting young adults to participate.

It was decided that qualitative research approaches might be necessary to answer these questions. A series of case studies were commissioned. These case studies can be found at the Young Adult Research page of the Faith Communities Today website at <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/young-adult-ministry-resources>.

In each case the case study involved one or more on-site visits with the local group and interviews with key leaders and some of the young adult participants, as well as gleaning information from working documents and Web sites.

These ten case studies seek to capture the diversity of American religious congregations today. They vary in size from a group as small as 50 to a megachurch.

These cases include:

- a Southern Baptist Church near Chattanooga;
- a young, single adult ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the suburbs of Salt Lake City;
- a Houston Baha'i Center;
- a United Church of Christ congregation in an urban neighborhood in Atlanta;
- an Evangelical megachurch in Spokane affiliated with the Foursquare denomination;
- an historically African American Church in Chicago;
- an Orthodox Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts;
- a Jewish Synagogue in Washington DC;
- a young adult church plant of an Assemblies of God Church in the New Jersey suburbs of New York City;
- and an historic Catholic Parish in downtown Chicago.

In addition, a review of current literature on this topic was commissioned. This review was authored by a young adult PhD candidate in sociology at Princeton University. She has been involved in young adult ministry and taught the subject at seminaries in Virginia and New England. She is currently engaged in community research in East Palo Alto, California.

It is hoped that careful reading and rigorous reflection on these case studies will lead to not only a deeper understanding of how some congregations are effectively engaging young adults, but also the identification of best practices to reach this distinctive demographic group.

Responses and suggestions should be addressed to:

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