

SHEPHERDING TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Church attendance has been steadily dwindling at a downward trajectory. People are leaving the Church at an alarmingly fast rate. This includes people of all ages, but this paper will focus primarily on the fact that young people are leaving the Church. Why are they leaving? What are issues going on in their lives that make them walk away from Church? What can a church be doing to keep young people engaged? What strategies can a church employ to retain its young members? This paper will address these questions by pulling on information from various resources.

INTRODUCTION

In America, there has been a mass deportation from the Church in the past few decades. Teens and young adults are leaving the Church in droves. In their study, the Barna Group says, “However, 19 percent of teens (ages 13–17)—and twice as many young adults (37% of those ages 18–22)—are atheist, agnostic or of no faith. More than any other U.S. generation before them, Gen Z does not assert a religious identity.”¹ Barna shows that there are fewer young people in Churches than ever before. Either they are leaving the Church, or they were never in the Church to begin with because their parents or grandparents left the Church. People of all generations are leaving the Church, but Gen Z² is going at a faster rate than any previous generation.³

This is a problem that Churches nationwide are facing, and it is a concern that needs to be addressed.⁴ Why are so many young people leaving? What can the Church be doing better to keep young people engaged? These are questions that this paper will focus on. These are questions that Church leaders need to ask their young people. “If someone from your congregation hasn’t been asking people why they’ve left or become inactive, maybe it’s time to

¹ “What makes American Teens Unique?” Barna Group: 2025).

² Gen Z is the generation of people born between the years of 1997 and 2012. It is also known as the first truly digital-native generation.

³ What makes American Teens Unique?” Barna Group: 2025).

⁴ What makes American Teens Unique?” Barna Group: 2025).

do so. Yes, it's true that the root cause of all spiritual decline and apathy is sin. But sometimes we like to toss that out as our easy, pat answer and look no further for other reasons. Perhaps some of the very things our congregations are doing—or failing to do—are contributing to the problem!”⁵ Sin will always be the biggest problem. It will always be the primary reason people leave the Church. However, Churches should still do what they can to address the issue. They should make every opportunity that they can to “stop the bleeding.”

In this paper, I will argue that there is not a single, perfect way to conduct ministry to teens and young adults. There are various tactics and strategies that other Churches or ministries can employ; however, there is no single technique that will work across the board. To support my point, I will draw on research from various resources, including books, journal articles, and interviews with youth and youth leaders. The first part of this paper will address the issues that young people face in the world today. It will highlight the challenges they are facing and how these challenges may be contributing to their decision to leave the Church. Then, the second part will discuss various tactics that a church can employ to keep young people engaged.

⁵ WELS commission on Youth, “Can we Stop the Bleeding? : A Call to WELS Congregations to Address Teen Spiritual Losses”, 3.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research conducted for this thesis combines literature research and face-to-face interviews. The goal of the interviews was to gather real-life examples of the truths that the literature research uncovered. The literature consulted for this thesis falls into two main categories: issues that young people face in the world and strategies to help them stay engaged in the Church.

For issues that young people face in the world, the primary source consulted was *iGen* by Jean M. Twenge. Twenge is a recognized authority on generational studies. She gave me a wonderful perspective on the issues that this specific generation of teens and young adults is facing. Her book was invaluable in addressing the problems that technology is having on our young people. *Generations* is another book by Twenge that I briefly cited in this paper for the same purpose as *iGen*.

I also consulted a journal article by Pastor Kowalke for this area of research. Pastor Kowalke wrote this article in 1937, so it illustrates how the issues faced by teens and young adults back then have evolved. The article was “The Church and Its Youth.”

Finally, several interviews were conducted with eleven different individuals to gain an understanding of their perceptions of the challenges that youth face. Interviews were with a pastor, a professor, a staff minister, three teens, and five young adults. They are all a part of the WELS. These interviews were the largest source of information in the paper, providing real-life experiences to inform the question of shepherding young people.

For strategies to help young people stay engaged in the Church, the primary source consulted was Julianna Shult’s and Mark Kiessling’s *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*.

This book, published by the LCMS, provided insights into various tactics that a church could employ. They made the point clear that the purpose of youth ministry and the Church in general is to point its youth to Christ.

Three other sources that I used in this section were *Foundation for Youth Ministry* by Dean Borgman, *Teaching the Faith at Home* by David Reuter, and the article “Present Day Youth Work in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the Light of the Scriptural Guidelines for Youth Work Outlined by Professor Kowalke’s Paper, ‘The Church and Its Youth’” by James Huebner. I used these resources sparingly, but each provided a small insight into tactics that the Church could employ in shepherding its youth.

Once again, the interviews I conducted provided the majority of the research for this section. The three interviewees in the ministry shared their own tips and tricks that they have used to build flourishing ministries in their respective fields. The teens and young adults I interviewed provided insights into ministering to young people from the perspective of a youth. All participants have been kept anonymous.

ISSUES THAT TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS ARE FACING

It is crucial to understand the challenges people face to minister to them effectively. King Solomon wrote in Eccl, “There is nothing new under the sun.”(Eccl 1:9, NIV). The devil employs the same tricks and tactics that he has used for generations, but he disguises these tricks in different forms. He adapts to the times. He utilizes various tactics to ensnare and drag people away from Christ and religion. This section of the paper will dive into some of those different “tricks” from the devil. It will examine some of the issues that young people are struggling with.

Nonreligious Households

The American family has changed. The things that people once saw as necessary are no longer critical. Fewer families are sitting down at the dining room table to have a family dinner. Fewer families are blocking out time to discuss family issues. Most importantly, fewer families are attending church together. Kowalke says,

Improve family life. The trend of the times is against a closely knit, quiet family in which the father and mother are the teachers, guides, and guardians for children until they are ready to go out into life on their own. Just because the trend of the times is to loosen the family ties and to minimize the importance of the family, we should concentrate on saving what is left of it and restoring it to its rightful place in our New Testament economy. In doing that our work will be less with the youth than with the parents.⁶

⁶ Erwin Kowalke, “The Church and Its Youth” (1937), 18.

Kowalke emphasizes the importance of parents being active and engaged in their children's spiritual lives. If a teenager sees their parents treating church as something optional or unimportant, they are likely to come to the same conclusion. If Kowalke recognized this to be true 89 years ago, it is only all the more true today.

A pastor that I interviewed came to the same conclusion. He said, "And I think too, the fact that there have been millennials and Gen Z typically raised by parents who statistically are not faithful in going to church or in a faith life either, so they haven't seen it done well."⁷ People tend to emulate what they see. Suppose teenagers spend their childhood with parents who don't make church a priority. When they go off on their own, why would they make church a priority? The change in culture needs to start with the parents, which will be discussed in much further detail later in the paper. The LC-MS published a very beneficial book on this topic. It said, "Many things take priority in a family. How parents and teens prioritize what is most important in their lives and how they draw healthy boundaries can be a difficult and unique decision."⁸ The topic of religion needs to be discussed at home with parents.

Outdated Youth Groups

Outdated tactics when ministering to our youth could be an issue that Churches are dealing with. The same activities and events that were successful in the early 2000s may not be practical today. Shults makes this point by saying, "While you may remember your teen years fondly, you

⁷ Interviewee 1, interview by author, Google Meet, October 27, 2025.

⁸ Julianna Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry* (St Louis: Concordia, 2023), 79.

were also never a teen in today's culture. The world is changing, and with it, our teens today will experience different questions, crises, and doubts than adults felt at that age."⁹

Teens and young adults want to discuss topics that matter to them. They want to have essential conversations with spiritual leaders in their lives. A youth leader made this point with an example from a teen in his congregation. He says,

One that I just talked to recently came on a mission trip with me, and I attended a campus ministry near his college, and he said, "Yeah, it's not really that interesting to go to." I said, "What's the problem?" "Well, number one, it's a mile away from campus. I don't have a car, so when it's wintertime, getting a mile away from campus is hard. That is a far way to go." And then he said, "all we do is have pizza, and then we do a Bible study that is just very basic. It's like, surface level, and it's just, you know, we're going to read the section of the Bible, and what does it say, and what does it mean, and that's it. And it's like, there has to be, like, we've got issues that we have to face. I want to talk about my classmate who's transgender, who keeps challenging me and wants me to talk about whether I'll use his preferred pronouns, we're talking about what it says in Habakkuk, about Assyrians coming, or Babylonians coming, or whatever. It just doesn't make any sense to me. Why are we talking about that?"¹⁰

He went on to clarify that he is not saying that we should do away with studying the Bible. There are amazing things to learn about in the book of Habakkuk. The point he was making was that searching the Scriptures provide answers to the problems they are dealing with here and now.¹¹

This was not always the focus of youth ministry in the past. This is evident in the way that Kowalke describes youth ministry. He says, "A second reason for the special interest shown by the Churches in their young people is that the young people do require entertainment and excitement and are encouraged by parents, pastors, teachers, and by their own inclination to look for it in the Church. And thirdly, there is the appalling loss to the Church of young people during

⁹ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 43.

¹⁰ Interviewee 2, interview by author, Google Meet, October 21, 2025.

¹¹ Interviewee 2, interview.

the ten years after confirmation.”¹² He sees the effectiveness of significant events and entertainment for youth ministry. This is not to bash Kowalke and his tactics. These may have been the strategies for several thriving youth ministries at the time, but times have changed. The young people in our congregations are not just looking for entertainment. They are not just looking for a concert where they can have a good time; they are also seeking an experience that will leave a lasting impression.¹³ Teens and young adults are seeking a safe space where they can discuss topics relevant to their lives.¹⁴ Are our Churches those safe spaces? Have we adapted to be that space for people to address the issues that they are facing?

Challenges in Transitions

The third issue that deserves attention was a significant factor in the title of this paper. “Shepherding teens and young adults in the 21st century.” When I refer to teens and young adults, I am primarily talking about individuals between the ages of 13 and 22. It is during these years of a person’s life that they undergo a tremendous amount of change. They take the foundational truths they learned in Church and catechism and must apply them in high school, where many different ideas are presented. After high school, the majority of young adults move out of the house for the first time. It is their first time away from Mom and Dad, and they need to make decisions independently. Is their faith going to stand up under the ideologies of a liberal university? Will they continue attending Church when none of their friends from their first job

¹² Kowalke, “The Church and Its Youth”, 9.

¹³ Interviewee 1, interview.

¹⁴ Interviewee 11, Interview by author, Google Meet, November 25, 2025.

do? During these times of transition, teens and young adults have to decide what is truly important in their lives.¹⁵

Many different experts have observed that the period between 8th grade and young adulthood is a time when people are increasingly leaving the Church. Jeane Twenge says, “This suggests that two forces are working simultaneously to pull iGen’ers¹⁶ away from religion: more iGen’ers are being raised in nonreligious households, and more iGen teens have decided not to belong to a religion anymore. That seems to happen sometimes between 8th grade and young adulthood, when adolescents begin to ask more questions and make decisions for themselves.”¹⁷ Shults even takes it a step further when she says,

Encouraging daily faith practices is especially necessary during times of transition. Times of high emotion, stress, and adjustment can cause faith practices to drop in priority. There may even be transitions, such as a divorce or a job loss, where parents will feel nervousness or even shame when it comes to attending worship or giving an offering. Transitions, even the ones we anticipate, may be filled with ups and downs that can pull us away from those places and practices where God promises to empower our faith.¹⁸

We must be aware of the transitions occurring in the lives of the people we minister to. These transitions, especially the unexpected ones, can cause a young adult to question everything happening in and around their life, including their relationship with God.

¹⁵ Dean Borgman, *Foundations for Youth Ministry: Theological Engagement with Teen Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 89.

¹⁶ The term iGen refers to children born between 1995 and 2012. It is for children who grew up in the era of social media and the internet, using their phones.

¹⁷ Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)*, (New York: Atria, 2017), 122.

¹⁸ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 80.

Shults pinpoints more closely where we see the most significant drop-off in worship attendance. Twenge saw it in those 10 years,¹⁹ however, Shults makes the point that the largest year of drop-off is the year following high school graduation.²⁰ Arguably, the most significant change in the life of a person. An interviewed Pastor saw this as the most significant area of change as well. He said,

Maybe one thing is, you were describing some of the challenges that they're facing after confirmation into college, adulthood, and High School. Like, in some ways, that's always been a challenging time...it's just a time where you said, for decades, young people are needing to make faith, not just something their parents guided them to do, the part of faith, that you have to take ownership of. And so, I think that's always been a challenge.²¹

A young adult can no longer hide behind their parents when it comes to their faith. As they head off to college, they need to be able to articulate their beliefs. Otherwise, when they are challenged on their faith, it could ultimately crumble as they are consumed by the secular culture and thinking around them. This was a major concern from a teenager that I interviewed. She was concerned about her upcoming college transition, and the uncertainty that that would cause in her life.²²

Rise of the Anxious Generation

The fourth and final issue that this paper will address may be the most significant problem in the lives of young people. Teens and young adults will never know what it was like to grow up

¹⁹ Twenge, *IGen*, 122.

²⁰ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 150.

²¹ Interviewee 1, interview.

²² Interviewee 10, Interview by author, Phone call, November 24, 2025.

without phones and technology. “Born in 1995 and later, they grew up with cell phones, had an Instagram page before they started High School, and do not remember a time before the internet.”²³ They are even making baby strollers that have not only a phone holder for the parent, but also an iPad holder that faces the baby.²⁴

Analysts have seen the correlation between the rise of screens and the rise of anxiety for young people. Twenge says, “The risk of unhappiness due to social media use is the highest for the youngest teens.”²⁵ She goes on to say, “Even if bullying is not involved, screen communication can be isolating, which might lead to depression and sometimes suicide.”²⁶ Twenge is the gold standard for understanding different generations. She doesn’t make these statements lightly; she uses evidence and data to support her assertions. She has specific data that shows the rise in depression in young adults. She says, “With more than one in nine teens and one in eleven young adults suffering from major depression, this is not a small issue. Even more than the data on rising loneliness and depressive symptoms, these gold-standard data suggest that something is seriously wrong with the lives of American teens.”²⁷

The experts in the secular world realize that there is something seriously wrong in the lives of teens. People are seeing the same thing when it comes to the teens of WELS.²⁸ They see the rise of anxiety, depression, and loneliness in the lives of young adults around them. Four

²³ Twenge, *IGen*, 2.

²⁴ Jean Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents — and What They Mean for America’s Future* (New York: Atria, 2023), 456.

²⁵ Twenge, *IGen*, 79.

²⁶ Twenge, *IGen*, 88.

²⁷ Twenge, *IGen*, 108.

²⁸ Interviewee 9, interview by author, In person, November 20, 2025.

different people that I interviewed all saw this as one of, if not the biggest, problems in the lives of teens and young adults. The first interviewee said, “The whole aspect of screens, phones, and tech is something that I've just really seen an isolation of, and this is true of adults too, but teenagers, even more, don't necessarily have the maturity to know how to navigate that.”²⁹ An adult may be able to handle the pressure that comes with having a cell phone. He may be able to handle the temptations that pop up on every single screen. It is much more difficult for young people to resist those temptations.

The second response to this was similar, but it focused more on the sense of belonging. Where do teens fit in? And how do they address the issue of online bullying? He said,

I think the other thought, though, is the issue of anxiety, I think any of the mental health things. So, there are a lot of anxious thoughts among the youth. The reasons are varied. Some people feel like there's really no break if you're on social media. So, I'll use this analogy I've heard. Let's say you're not getting along with peers at school and they're picking on you. It used to be that you could go home and be fine, as if you didn't have to deal with that. However, now it's as if people can still kind of pick on you or bother you on social media, so there's never really a break from the barrage of challenges, whether it's from peers or the usual temptations that come with trying to find your identity as a youth. You know, where do I fit in?³⁰

There was once a sense of relief and comfort in knowing that you were safe at home. You were safe behind the closed front door with your parents, but now that safety is fleeting. Bullies can pick those locks and easily come through the door via your lit-up screens.

This sense of self-worth is essential to the youth. A young adult saw it as their biggest challenge growing up. They said, “Overall, I would say that self-worth is probably a big one. And identity, I think, often teens look to places like social media and their peers for their identity and self-worth, especially when trying to keep teens in the Church, you want them to be focused

²⁹ Interviewee 1, interview.

³⁰ Interviewee 3, interview by author, In person, October 23, 2025.

on how God sees them and what God is telling them is true about themselves. Still, very often they're not doing that, and they have a hard time connecting the worth that they know is true to their own life.”³¹ It has been said that Gen Z and Polars³² (born 2013-2029) are just searching for likes.³³ They are comparing themselves to the people around them. “Am I getting more likes than my peers on my Instagram page?” “How many comments did I receive on my last post?” These are questions that young people ask themselves every time they go online. They are linking their identity and their self-worth to their social media pages. A former recruitment counselor at Martin Luther College saw this as a major issue.³⁴ The problem with this is what happens when your latest post doesn't perform to your liking? It is devastating to these young people, and it is a reason the depression and anxiety levels are on the rise.

The final interviewee had a long, but incredibly insightful answer to this problem of anxiety. He not only saw the issue among the teens, but also an issue that the adults are dealing with. He said,

So, one obvious, really, massive challenge that everybody is facing right now is the pressure of technology and social media. How is that driving some of the disconnect, the distraction, and sort of entertainment addiction that we're facing as a site? Tonight, I'm hosting a workshop for parents that will discuss the impact of technology on your home and what you can do about it. One of the things that's really fascinating to see is that they've actually coined a new term for it: technofence, which is where a parent, using technology, interferes with the relational atmosphere of the home. And so a lot of the research is pointing to how kids are suffering from higher levels of anxiety, hyperactivity, lack of focus, lower cognition, lower self-esteem, and all of that relating to their parents using technology for more extended periods during the day; it's a clear thing. My parents don't have time for me because they're too busy looking at their phones, right? And so that's causing a host of issues for kids. Now it is evident that children have been leaving

³¹ Interviewee 4, interview by author, Google Meet, October 28, 2025.

³² “Polars” is used to refer to Generation Alpha (born 2013-present). They are called polars due to facing intense political polarization and the reality of melting polar ice caps.

³³ Twenge, *Generations*, 444.

³⁴ Interview 7, interview by author, In Person, November 20, 2025.

the church since before we had the technology. That can't be the only reason it's happening, but certainly it is a challenge. And then when you look at social media and how it affects higher anxiety, lower self-esteem for teenagers, especially, and not just the higher anxiety, lower self-esteem, but also the kind of just the spiritual side of that right, garbage in garbage out there's they're focusing so much on the stuff that social media offers that it's just not healthy. That's a significant issue driving some departures from the church.³⁵

They made an important point that people, and especially young people, were leaving the Church before this technology ever became a problem. Technology is not the sole problem in the lives of young people, and it may not be the primary factor in their decision to leave the Church, but it is a contributing factor. It is an issue that leads to other problems in the lives of these young adults; therefore, it is an issue that warrants discussion.

These four issues that were raised are not an exhaustive list. They are not the only issues in the lives of the teens, nor are they the only issues causing them to leave the Church. They were, however, recurring issues that came from multiple sources. It is crucial to understand the issues and challenges that young people face to craft the most effective strategies and tactics to support them. Different people will need other things to keep them engaged. Just as various people face different struggles, so too will they need different tactics to keep them focused, which is the focus of the next section of the paper.

³⁵ Interviewee 2, interview.

STRATEGIES TO KEEP TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS ENGAGED

Now that we are aware of several challenges, we can explore some strategies to keep young people engaged. What can a church be doing to best minister to its youth? How can they make it more meaningful and engaging for their young people? These are questions that the rest of this paper will attempt to answer. Once again, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ministering to youth. A strategy that works at a church in downtown Appleton may not work in Fox Lake, WI. You need to know your people and experiment to find the best things that work for you.

A key question to consider before exploring potential strategies is, “What are we willing to give up as a church?” Are we willing to make concessions to doctrine and Scripture so that we can fit in better with the culture around us? This is a question that many Church bodies are grappling with. Twenge says, “Some of those churches will begin to loosen their views on premarital sex, same-sex marriage, and transgender individuals as their acceptance becomes more mainstream, even among religious people.”³⁶ Are we willing to loosen our views on issues that we know contradict the Bible, so that more people walk through our doors? Will we preach a good and happy message so that people stop leaving the Church?

Twenge goes on to provide a real-life example of this change in morality. She says,

Some students have taken this notion even further-beyond offensive or extreme speech to anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or challenges them to question their actions. Everett Piper, the president of Oklahoma Wesleyan University, said a student told him he felt “victimized” by a sermon on a passage in Corinthians about showing love. Why? Because it “made him feel bad for not showing love! In his mind, the speaker was wrong for making him, and his peers, feel uncomfortable.” In this way of thinking, no

³⁶ Twenge, *IGen*, 142.

one should ever say anything that makes a student feel bad, even if it might inspire him or her to do better.³⁷

Suppose no one is ever able to say anything that makes someone feel bad, then the Church is in significant trouble when it comes to preaching the Law. The purpose of the Law is to uncover our sin. It shows us our need for a savior. However, young adults are not viewing this as the primary purpose of the Church. A young adult remarked, “It makes me really sad when Christians condemn other people for who they are. That’s not really the point of being Christian at all, it’s supposed to be the complete opposite, accepting people for who they are and still love them anyway, because that’s what Jesus did, and that’s something they forget quite a lot.”³⁸ The preaching of the Law has now been viewed as condemnation from Christians, but that does not mean we can do away with it.

We must preach the Law and stay faithful to the Scriptures. We preach the Law so that we can preach the superior message, the message of Christ. This is ultimately the goal when it comes to all ministry, including ministering to young people. Shults makes this point when she says,

Youth ministry happens in the context of angsty teens whose attention spans are short, exhausted parents who are trying to do it all, and congregations that can sometimes be filled with all kinds of disagreements. We can’t do this work without God. It is so important that we seek to care for young people in a way that doesn’t lose sight of Jesus as the center of all we do. Our desire for the best working strategy can sometimes come at the cost of what is really important. Be willing to give up your perfectly conceived plan in order to keep your eyes focused on the redemption, forgiveness, and love that Jesus gives to his people. We don’t do youth ministry in a pristine bubble. It’s not a stock photo. But perhaps in the broken, frustrating, or just plain awkward parts, we get to see Jesus powerfully at work bringing life and salvation into our lives and ministry.”³⁹

³⁷ Twenge, *IGen*, 157.

³⁸ Twenge, *IGen*, 231.

³⁹ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 199.

That is the goal of ministering to young people. The goal is to bring Christ to the lives of people who need him most. In a world of constant change, our goal is to share the unchanging truth of Christ with young people.

Alone, we would fail miserably in this task. However, we are not alone in this challenge. We know that God is with us in this work and that He desires to save all people, including young people. Shults says, “healthy youth ministry isn’t built on your effort. God loves the teens in our congregations and communities more than we can ever conceive. That God is at work in you, in parents, in supportive adults, in pastors, in commissioned workers, in staff, in lay leaders, and in more people. If we try to build healthy youth ministry on our own, we will inevitably fail. When God is at work, we know that we will find success.”⁴⁰

The following are various strategies or tactics that a church can employ in its programs for ministering to young people. Once again, strategies that work at one church may not be effective at another. Many of these strategies work better with smaller groups than a church of 2,000 members can accomplish. The point is to try out different things and to find the methods that work best for you, and the ultimate goal is to point these young people to Christ. That you would be able to point young people to their unchanging Savior in an ever-changing world, there are different tactics to achieve this. Still, the result should always be the same, because Christ is the only one who can solve all the challenges mentioned earlier in this paper. He may not solve them according to our desires or time-tables, but we leave that to God in his infinite wisdom.

⁴⁰ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 187.

Christian Camps and Mission Trips

The first tactic this paper will address is building a sense of community. This is especially important for teens and young adults who come from broken homes. They have a chance to escape the things that are going on at home, and they can gather in the community that the Church has built for them. It is also a place for all young people to gather with other believers and feel a sense of belonging. It can combat the issues of loneliness, isolation, and anxiety that were addressed earlier.

One way Churches are building a sense of community is through various camps and mission trips.⁴¹ There are countless different summer camps in the WELS that a teen could go to. There is Camp South in Georgia, Camp Phillip in Wisconsin, Rocky Mountain Christian Camp in Colorado, and Camp Shiloh in Texas, to name a few. I spoke with a Lutheran Pastor who was in charge of Camp South, and he spoke very highly of the community that they had created. He said, “So when kids are out of school, and the routine is already different, they might fall out of their usual routines, even if they have a good family, devotionally, for those kinds of things. So the youth camps are an opportunity, again, to spend a lot of time in the Word, whether it's the youth rally or even like the district camps.”⁴² These camps provide children with the opportunity to spend time in the Word with others their own age. It provides structure to their lives that they may not have otherwise. The pastor also discussed the benefits that these camps offer children from broken homes. He said,

I also think of some of the kids who come from tough homes, too, you know. So, if they're coming from a split home or something similar. Camp actually provided a lot of structure, too; for instance, you have a week where it's just a break from being tossed from mom to dad. I get to grow in God's faith. It provided something cool. And then they

⁴¹ Interviewee 9, interview.

⁴² Interviewee 3, interview.

go home and share with their parents, saying, 'Here's what we learned.' And so, sometimes, there was even that, where the kids would relay to their parents, 'Here's what we learned; here's how it could impact our lives.'⁴³

These camps not only provided a safe space for these teens to grow in God's Word, but they also allowed them to relay the things they learned to their parents. They have the opportunity to take the things that they learned in camp and take them out into the world with them.

There are numerous blessings associated with Christian camps, and it is essential to take advantage of the educational opportunities they offer. However, it is crucial not to overlook the obvious benefits of them. It is a place that allows these young people to have fun together. It is a safe space where they can come together and enjoy their time with one another. The pastor made sure to emphasize this. He said, "I think the other really cool thing is just allowing teens to have fun together. Like I've even heard the leaders and pastors say, 'This was really fun,' and isn't that what we want as Christians who are spending time together, having fun, but then also growing in God's Word?"⁴⁴ The Pastor emphasized that this isn't just an event where they have fun, but they have fun around the Word of God. They are having fun while they deepen and grow in their faith.

I interviewed a young adult who was a camper at Camp Phillip and is now a counselor at the camp. She described many of the same benefits that Camp Phillip offers. She emphasized especially the fact that a camp gives people an opportunity to create meaningful relationships with one another. She said,

The relationship aspect of things, there are so many areas that you can develop relationships within, like the staff have relationships with each other, my junior staff have friendships. You also have the unique opportunity to connect with people, both younger and older than you, and gain a perspective that you might not have if you're only focused

⁴³ Interviewee 3, interview.

⁴⁴ Interviewee 3, interview.

on your peer group. So that's something that the things that I've learned from my junior staff are, like, so valuable to me, because if I had never talked to a high school student or about a specific thing, like, I wouldn't be able to take that away. So, again, those relationships at Camp Philip, specifically. But then there's also the creative aspect that Camp life provides. We're creative in every single thing that we do, but then we also take that creativity, and Christ is at the center, and that is very valuable to me, growing up going to public school, I didn't really have Christ at the center of that at all. So, when I went to camp as a camper, it was the one area of my life where Christ was the center. And that was really valuable to me.⁴⁵

It is essential to show these young people how to have Christ at the center of their lives.

As the interviewee mentioned, people who attend public schools don't have this experience.

They live in a world where it is more challenging to talk about God in school. They learn about evolution and how the world came into existence billions of years ago due to the Big Bang. A

Christian camp teaches them how to put Christ at the center of their lives in everything they do.

She went on to say, "I think the thing that I've taken away so much from Camp is the constant reminder that Christ can be at the center of everything that you do, like we play games in the woods and we have Bible study multiple times a day. In both those situations, you're showing God's love, and you're learning what God has provided for you."⁴⁶ Christ is at the center of your life when you are reading his Word, when you are singing his praises, and even when you are just having fun with your friends.⁴⁷

Adjacent to the Christian camps is the opportunity to go on mission trips. They offer many benefits similar to those of camps, but they also provide an additional benefit. They allow teens and young adults to let their light shine in the world. They can take the truths that they have learned from Church, camps, or school out into the world with them. They have the opportunity

⁴⁵ Interviewee 4, interview.

⁴⁶ Interviewee 4, interview.

⁴⁷ Interviewee 10, interview.

to help those in need of assistance. Shults sees this as a tremendous blessing. She says, “The heart of vocation is service. We serve, sharing the Gospel in word and deed, because Christ first served us. Youth who are living out their unique vocations are taking opportunities in the Church and community to serve and lead consistently now and into the future.”⁴⁸

A pastor I interviewed also saw this blessing in their church. He said, “This is where, like, I think camps and mission trips give you a bigger perspective, as you see what life could be like in another part of the country, you can see how, you know, we take for granted that we have the Gospel or a camp. Like, if you're one of two or three kids at your church and you don't have a lot of teens being at camp, you're reminded, ‘No, I'm part of something bigger,’ and that's a cool thing too.”⁴⁹ These young people are given a chance to see that they are not alone in their faith. They are a part of the Holy Christian Church. There are other teens and young adults just like them, and that is an important thing to know.

After seeing the obvious benefits of these camps and mission trips, the question remains as to how a church can effectively implement them within its ministry. It will not be feasible for each church to start its own camp or plan an extravagant mission trip, and the good news is that they don't have to. There are numerous camps and mission trip opportunities already in place. The strategy here is to reach out to the churches around us and gather a group. There is no need to reinvent the wheel here. It is just a matter of making full use of the things that are already in place.

A good example of this is the youth ministry groups that are gathering in the South Atlantic District. They offer Camp South and The Amazing Race in the summer for middle

⁴⁸ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 174.

⁴⁹ Interviewee 3, interview.

school and high school-aged individuals. They offer ski trips in the winter, allowing young people to stay connected throughout the year, not just in the summer. They hold monthly gatherings for young people in various circuits at a designated church. They maintain this consistency throughout the year, allowing young people to grow alongside their chaperones while also forming closer bonds with peers in the area.⁵⁰

It would not be reasonable to discuss the various camps and communities that the WELS has created without mentioning the Youth Rally. The International WELS Youth Rally takes place every other year, bringing together over 2,000 young people from around the world. It has even been described as the highlight of some of these teenagers' years because they get to gather with friends who share their faith.⁵¹ Therefore, the goal of a church should be to promote these opportunities for the youth within the Church. Encourage them to take a mission trip. Encourage them to register for a camp. Encourage them to attend the Youth Rally so that they can grow in faith alongside their friends.

Making it Meaningful

People want their actions to matter. There is a term in school called “busy-work,” and it is something that almost all students dread. There is no point in doing an assignment or doing an activity just for the sake of doing it. The same is true for ministering to young people. They want the activities that they are doing to matter. They want there to be a connection between the things

⁵⁰ Interviewee 5, interview by author, In person, November 18, 2025.

⁵¹ Interviewee 6, interview by author, In person, October 4, 2025.

they are talking about in Bible class and their lives. How can they deal with the issues that are going on in the world around them?

A pastor saw this, and he utilized small groups to encourage young people to address these problems. He said,

But if one student starts to be a little vulnerable, we have found that it opens up the doors for others to be vulnerable as well. This is particularly true on the talking side of things, at least here. But I also would say that at least compared to when I was that age, there's just so much more out there, again, because of technology on different topics that I do see, even just culturally, that they're willing to approach certain topics a little more freely than I was, because they're hearing about it and reading about it all the time. Now, again, that's not every student, but generally, they're willing to talk about pornography in small groups. There's no way that I would have. And is that a product of culture? Is it a product of our ministry? Maybe a little bit of both, I'm not sure, exactly. We do intentionally try to open up those lines of communication.⁵²

There has been a decline in morality worldwide. This truth, paired with the rise of technology, has caused issues to be constantly at the forefront of young people's minds. They are seeing violence right in front of their faces. They are seeing a famous politician being shot at close range at a political event.⁵³ They want to discuss these issues and their impact on their lives.

Another person that I interviewed encouraged the same concept. He said, "It's intentionally targeting college students and just past college young adults. And the idea of the ministry is to hold those sort of mini rallies, in a sense, like mini youth rallies, in a way, but with the idea of saying, let's get you together to talk about what your actual struggles are, and actually be open about the things that we struggle with."⁵⁴ It is essential to provide these young people with an opportunity to open up and share the struggles they are facing. They can share their

⁵² Interviewee 1, interview.

⁵³ This is in reference to the assassination of Charlie Kirk. There were countless close-up videos of him being shot in front of everyone. These videos surfaced on X, Instagram, Facebook, and other major social media sites.

⁵⁴ Interviewee 2, interview.

problems in a safe space, and they might discover that they are not alone in facing these challenges. They are not alone in their struggles, as their classmates, churchmates, and friends are facing these struggles alongside them.

Shults noticed this trend as well. She explains that these significant events and games are more about the meaning behind them, rather than the events themselves. She says,

However, I doubt that teens today are going to be quite as excited about a peanut hunt or square dancing as older adults might be. What may be more important to capture is what was valuable about those games. Was it a chance to be with peers and develop a community of friends who were Christians? Was it that the games helped take their mind off struggles at home or in the world and experience warmth and grace? Was it that the games were directed by youth and that they appreciated the chance to serve and lead? When we know why those games were so important, we can make choices that help to provide the same experience for youth today in a context that meets them where they are.⁵⁵

Shults makes a valid point that it is not as much about the what of the event as it is about the why. Why are we throwing an event? Is it because we are giving young people an opportunity to escape from the troubles in their lives? If so, then that is excellent. However, if an event is being thrown because a group of adults has decided that this is what young people want, then, perhaps it is time to reconsider that plan.

I am by no means suggesting that churches should eliminate events or games for their young adults. I am suggesting that there should be a conversation with the church's youth to determine what they actually want. Have the conversation on why you are doing some of your events. Your events don't have to be on either side of the spectrum, either fun or meaningful. They can be both. The best way to accomplish this is by having a conversation with your young people. Solve the issue of outdated youth groups, by making these groups meaningful to their

⁵⁵ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 29.

participants, by learning from the participants. And give them the opportunity to discuss the things that matter to them in the safe space that a church can create.

Leadership Opportunities

“We know young leaders have a strong impact on the retention in congregations. In our research, we found that congregations that had at least one leader under thirty-two years old were more likely to attract young adults, retain young adults through high school, and retain young adults overall.”⁵⁶ The third strategy that a church could work on implementing is starting young people in leadership at a younger age. Young people are not the Church of tomorrow; they are the Church of today.⁵⁷

There is often a stigma that young people lack the knowledge or experience to contribute to leadership. The idea is that adults should handle the business because they know how the Church should be run, and young people should follow the decisions that are made. This is thinking far too little of our young people. Shults says,

“Please do not underestimate your young people. For too long, the church has expected too little from teens who are capable of thoughtful decision-making, strong leadership, and deep empathy. They are adult members of the church today, not just the future. When we treat them as children rather than developing adults, we miss out on all they bring and are capable of doing. God is working in and through them as they learn and grow in him.”⁵⁸

These teens and young adults are capable of handling responsibility, however that may look in your church.

⁵⁶ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 105.

⁵⁷ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 19.

⁵⁸ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 111.

This is not an entirely new concept to the Church. In an article published by WELS in the 1990's, the solution was addressed. They said, "Involve young men and women in your ministry teams. Unless there's some regulation in your church's constitution or by-laws prohibiting it, why not ask a few sixteen year olds to sit in on or even serve on your Evangelism and Outreach committee or other such organizations? They have some great input to offer!"⁵⁹

Three leaders in the Church that I interviewed saw the importance of starting young people in leadership. A pastor that I interviewed said,

I think it's just a matter of the leadership or the pastor thinking about ways to integrate them. You could have a teen with the right guidance, run your social media for the church, and do a way better job than the pastor's going to do, you know, that type of thing. So, I don't know that it's rocket science. I think it's just a matter of knowing your teens and then being intentional with plugging them in, one way or another.⁶⁰

These young people can do specific jobs tremendously better than the adults in the congregation. Earlier sections of this paper addressed the problems that screens and social media are causing in the lives of young people . It is also a blessing that they know the ins and outs of those devices, so they could run a social media account for the Church so much better than a pastor could.

A professor of young people saw the same benefit for young people. He recognized the benefits of getting them involved in the Church at a young age. He said, "Get them involved. Get them serving. That would be another big advice I have is to think often about the past. We've often waited thinking that when you're older, we'll get you involved. How can we get them serving younger and even more? Because I think a lot of the research would support this. When

⁵⁹ WELS commission on Youth, "Can we Stop the Bleeding?", 6.

⁶⁰ Interviewee 1, interview.

they're active, they're looking at churches. This is my church, not someday I'll serve in this church, but I'm already serving.”⁶¹

A staff minister that I interviewed also saw how starting them in leadership roles at a younger age can help with evangelism and outreach. If young people come to a church for the first time, are they more likely to stay if they see a young person serving or leading, or not? He says,

Giving them opportunities to feel that they matter to the church. There's a saying that whoever you put in front is who's going to be in your pews. So, how many of our churches have nobody who's under the age of 40, and then we ask, ‘Why don't we have more young people in our pews?’ Because they don't see any young people. So how are you going to tell them that this is a place where you belong? And that takes work. It takes work on the part of the pastor to find what this young adult is good at? What is their passion? How can I make the most of that in ministry?⁶²

The last thing that he said is essential. It takes work. Putting a young person in leadership is not something that can be done at a moment's notice. There needs to be planning. Effective communication is essential, and a significant amount of work is required to identify what that young person excels at.

You can be setting up a young person to fail if you place them somewhere that needs a spot filled. You need to determine what they want to do, and where they would like to serve. Shults says, “By identifying a teen's passions, gifts, and skills, youth ministry can help provide places where young people can serve effectively. Youth can be given opportunities to provide input and ideas toward ministry as well as chances to actively use their gifts.”⁶³ This is something that requires effort, but it is an effort worth undertaking. It is a strategy that a church can employ

⁶¹ Interviewee 3, interview.

⁶² Interviewee 2, interview.

⁶³ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 30.

to help young people understand that this is their church.⁶⁴ They are a part of this church. Their opinion matters, their voice matters, and most of all, they matter.

Relationships Matter

This paper has discussed tactics and strategies that a church can use to keep teens and young adults engaged. However, one of the most important things a church its members can do is simply get to know their young people. Have a conversation with a young person. Get to know them. Find out what they like, what they don't like, and some of the things that are going on in their lives. This can show that you care, not just that they are at church, but you care about them as a person. Build this first and the Church strategies will come more naturally.⁶⁵

A young adult that I interviewed saw this as one of the most important things a church could be doing. She said, "Something that I've realized the last few years, and I've been able to do, is that the relationship that you build before you give advice or give direction to a student is the most important thing, just letting the teens that you work with, or anyone you work with in the church, letting them know that you care about them, is something that is really valuable."⁶⁶

It is not a secret that people are more willing to open up about things that are going on in their lives with people they know. They also may be more willing to be open about sensitive matters with leaders in the Church who are not their parents. A pastor told me that they had a young leader who had a great connection with a teen in their church, and the teen was much

⁶⁴ Interviewee 8, interview by author, Phone call, November 20, 2025.

⁶⁵ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 15.

⁶⁶ Interviewee 4, interview.

more willing to come and talk to the young leader about the sins that he had been dealing with than he was to speak to his parents about it.⁶⁷ This all began with the relationship the young leader established with the teen. This special relationship allowed the teen to trust the leader and confess his sin to him, which allowed the leader to offer God's incredible and free forgiveness.

The professor whom I interviewed stressed the importance of relationships in his ministry. He said, "I think building relationships with kids is the biggest thing. It is important to get to know your youth. I realize it's not feasible in every church, but if a kid's into a sport, then go to that sport. If they're into something else, then get to really know them and connect with them. That will establish personal connections in your ministry."⁶⁸ He also touched on the issue that youth ministry is constantly changing. He described how building a relationship with the youth could be a solution to this issue. If you are getting to know the youth, they will likely be able to help you with that issue.⁶⁹ They will discuss with you the things that are bothering or troubling them, and they will explain ways to help them get through it.

Building a healthy youth ministry begins with fostering healthy relationships with the youth you are ministering to.⁷⁰ It starts with getting to know them and creating a connection of trust between each other. Shults says, "The more healthy, Christ-centered relationships you can build, the greater the impact you have on youth ministry."⁷¹ The way a church implements this is simply by talking to its young people and staying connected to them, as well as the things that

⁶⁷ Interviewee 1, interview.

⁶⁸ Interviewee 3, interview.

⁶⁹ Interviewee 3, interview.

⁷⁰ Interviewee 7, interview.

⁷¹ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 191.

are happening in their lives.⁷² Reach out to them if you know that they are struggling with something.⁷³ It doesn't have to be the pastor, but can be any member of the congregation with a loving heart. Build those relationships. Build those relationships when they are going through times of transitions. Build them and good things will follow.

Active and Engaged Parents

“There is a reason God gave us parents: so that our days may be long in the promises God has given us. While they might not see it now, teens need their parents. The wisdom, love, and support of parents help shape young people as they develop into adults.”⁷⁴ God gave us parents for a reason. They are the most influential people in our lives. It is clear, then, that ministering to young people should begin with the parents.⁷⁵ If parents are not engaged, the chances are that their teens and young adults will also be disengaged. This was pointed out in an interview. The interviewee said, “And then he looks at his dad and his dad doesn't, you know, read the Bible, doesn't really go to church. What's likely going to happen is, you know, he's going to say, well, this is what dad does. So why would I do something different?”⁷⁶ It all starts with the parents.

Scripture is clear about how parents should be training their children in the faith.⁷⁷ “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children.

⁷² Interviewee 8, interview.

⁷³ WELS commission on Youth, “Can we Stop the Bleeding?”, 6.

⁷⁴ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 90.

⁷⁵ Kowalke, “The Church and Its Youth”, 10.

⁷⁶ Interviewee 3, interview.

⁷⁷ Interviewee 2, interview.

Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deut 6:6-7). We are to impress the true faith upon our children. Moses gives us a clear solution to the first issue that this paper mentioned. This combats, in a simple way, the non-religious households. The psalms tell us the same thing. “We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.” (Ps. 78:4). This command to train your children in the faith is not just found in the Old Testament, but it is also commanded in the New Testament. Paul writes, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” (Eph 6:4). We have this clear command from God, and so, the question is how we carry it out.

One way some churches are addressing this is by having parents teach catechism to their children. After all, Luther wrote the Small Catechism with parents in mind.⁷⁸ A person I had interviewed had done this at a church they attended. They laid out the steps they had taken to accomplish this. They said,

We blew up our entire catechism process to do something that is entirely household-based. The way our catechism process works is that parents attend an orientation. When they get started, they get a binder in their hands. That binder has basically been rewritten from a family Bible study paradigm. The idea is that every lesson is structured like this: you read a part of the Bible, and then you read some material from the binder that tells you what you're reading. And then you have some questions that prompt you talk about your faith. Discuss how this applies to your faith, drawing on the encouragement that parents share with their children. Hey, this is how this shows up in my heart, right? And then usually, there's an activity that they'll do together as a family after every few lessons. This could be volunteering or discussing a faith issue with someone they know.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ David Reuter, *Teaching the Faith at Home: What does this mean? How is this done?* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), 131.

⁷⁹ Interviewee 2, interview.

This could be a valuable model for different congregations to explore, but it is essential to be aware of its potential danger. It may not be effective for every area, culture, or congregation. A pastor whom I interviewed recognized this danger. He said, “You want to take what you're learning, and then how do we bring it into the home even more? Ideally, we would have our parents going through the truths of Scripture with their kids, and they would constantly have this dialogue. But I think that one challenge I've seen is just what if you have a really broken home, or you have somebody who's really new to the faith who says, I don't really know that, like how to do that.”⁸⁰

Are students from broken homes excluded from receiving the confirmation class? Does the student who has parents that are new to the faith struggle because they have worse teachers than their friends whose parents are lifelong Christians? These are questions that the Church needs to ask and answer before it implements this strategy.

No matter what strategy you use, the point is always the same. Parents play a vital role in their children's lives, especially when it comes to their faith. Churches need to be aware of this and work closely with parents whenever possible. Pastor Huebner highlights this point in his paper on youth ministry. He says,

One area that deserves a great deal of attention is the role which the parents play in relation to the teenager. It is true enough that we are living in an age in which the family unit is downgraded and even mocked. But the Gospel fills empty lives. Therefore, we will want to work with parents and work with our youth as future parents to instill in them the proper scriptural understanding of the Christian home, Christian parents, and Christian children.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Interviewee 3, interview.

⁸¹ James Huebner, “Present Day Youth Work in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the Light of the Scriptural Guidelines for Youth Work Outlined by Professor Kowalke's Paper, ‘The Church and Its Youth.’” (1980), 35.

Encourage parents to encourage their children. Encourage them to spend time in the Word with their family. Encourage them to pray with their family.⁸² Encourage them to discuss challenging topics in the light of God's Word. And most importantly, encourage them to point their children to Christ.

Point the Youth to Christ

The final tactic is both a strategy and ultimately the entire goal. The primary purpose of ministering to young people and ministering to all people is to point them to Christ. Shults says, "Healthy youth ministry really does boil down to sharing the Gospel with teens, and that is an answer that will never change. It's not surprising or new. It is as it has always been. We share the same heart and passion as youth leaders- to see more young people in the saving faith of Jesus."⁸³

How will we point young people to Christ? We will tell them about all the things that he has done for them. We will have the cross at the forefront of our ministry. Shults says, "Jesus has been raised, and in that, we have our hope. From community-building to Bible study, the cross and empty tomb should be at the center of everything we do. Healthy youth ministry should seek to point youth leaders, parents, and teens back to the love of Jesus and the forgiveness we receive through His death and resurrection."⁸⁴ Some people may think that young people need activities and different events, and these things may be beneficial; however, what they need above all is

⁸² Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 79.

⁸³ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 10.

⁸⁴ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 21.

the forgiveness and peace that only Christ can provide.⁸⁵ For this reason, the most critical strategy and tactic that a church can employ is to have Christ at the center of everything it does. Huebner sees this as a priority when he says, “Plan and pre-plan, but do not let the outward forms take precedence over the number one priority for a youth group, teaching God’s mysteries, the saving Gospel.”⁸⁶

A way to keep Christ’s message at the forefront of a young person’s life is to provide a constant reminder of their baptism. This amazing gift of a sacrament that God has given to his people for the forgiveness of their sins. Shults says, “Teens need to be reminded that in their baptism, God did not just act once and never again. Instead, our baptism is continuous, and we carry it every day. God was at work then and still gives good gifts today. Regardless of how long ago a teen’s baptism was, healthy youth ministry ensures that baptism is continually called to mind and helps youth more deeply understand the faith given to them.”⁸⁷ Paul explains the tremendous blessing of baptism in his letter to the Galatians. He says, “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (Gal 3:26-27). Remind the young people you minister to of this amazing truth as often as possible. Remind them that they have clothed themselves with Christ. They have clothed themselves with their Savior, who loves them and wants to be with them. This is the whole point of youth ministry.⁸⁸ This is the whole point of all ministry. To teach people about the incredible love that their God has for them, and how their Lord put this love on display on the

⁸⁵ Interviewee 11, interview.

⁸⁶ Huebner, “Present Day Youth Work in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod”, 33.

⁸⁷ Shults, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry*, 124.

⁸⁸ Interviewee 4, interview.

cross. You still have your activities. You host events and make intentional efforts to keep young people engaged. These are all good things. But at the end of the day, point your people to Jesus, their Savior.

CONCLUSION

Shepherding teens and young adults in the 21st century can seem like a daunting task. These young people are facing numerous challenges in their lives that the Church hasn't always had to address. That is not to say that young people have not had struggles in the past; they have, but now it looks a little different. The introduction of technology and social media is a significant issue that young people and the Church must learn to navigate. The decline of morality and the rise of broken homes are potential problems. There are numerous problems and issues that teens and young adults may face, and the Church should be a safe place for young people to work through these challenges.

There are many different strategies and tactics that a church could employ to keep young people engaged, and this paper explored a few of those options. It is essential to recognize that there is no single solution or 'silver bullet' when it comes to youth ministry. There is no universal strategy that will work at every single church. Different tactics will work for other areas and different-sized churches. Therefore, it is essential to communicate effectively. Communicate with the leaders in your church. Communicate with the parents of your youth. And most of all, communicate with your young people. Discover what they like and what works well for them.

Youth ministry is an ever-changing thing in the world. The strategies that were effective five years ago may not be effective today. However, this does not mean we give up. We do not give up, but we continue to minister to these young people. We make it a point to include them whenever possible. A good example of this is the WELS National Conference on Lutheran

Leadership that is taking place in January 2026. The goal is to have 10% of attendees at this conference be teens and young adults. This shows the intentional effort that WELS is making to include its youth. That they would involve them in leadership and seek their opinions on these critical matters is a huge step in the right direction.

In this paper, I worked to defend the thesis that there is no universal strategy for youth ministry. This remains true in worldly matters. There is, however, an ideal strategy, and that is to point these young people to Christ. Point them to their Savior who never changes in an ever-changing world. Work with parents. Connect them with groups. Take them on mission trips. Activate them for service. But above all, use these strategies to point them to their Savior. Encourage your young students in the same way that Paul encouraged his young student, Timothy. Where he said, “My child, find your source of strength in the kindness of Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 2:1).⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Grammarly and AI were used in proofreading this paper.

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