

# Building Young Adult Inclusivity in your Unity Center – a guide for Ministry Leaders

Are you a leader or lay leader in your Unity Center who wants to see an intergenerational congregation? Do you want to invite your Y.O.U.ers into the wider community when they graduate? Do you have an NGU group that you want to support? Is your congregation wanting to build a legacy that will last? Wherever you are in your journey as a community, this guide can help you, as a spiritual leader or leadership team, develop a strategic plan to increase the inclusivity of young adults, and help bring young adults into your congregation.

Now, you're probably thinking, *We are super inclusive! They just don't come back!* And that's right, you probably are super inclusive - based on the perspectives of your majority. When dealing with inclusivity though, you have to put yourselves in the shoes of the population you are trying to include. Whether it be age, race, ethnicity, ability, or otherwise; every identity group is going to have a different life experience than other identities. Those within that identity group will often share lived experiences with each other that others don't automatically understand. For example, technology has created large differences in how different generations process information, with the youngest generations drawn to images, video clips, and sound bites yet often ignoring lengthy text, print media, or overly simple imagery. In other words, a picture is worth a thousand words, but a thousand words are homework.

When deciding to bring in young adults, remember that there are different groups you are dealing with: the recent graduates of Y.O.U., the young adults who were once in Y.O.U., and the young adults who have never been to Unity. These audiences will have similar needs, but may require different styles of engagement. Before you discount the young adults who have never attended Unity, remember that many studies show an increasing rejection of traditional religious organizations among Millennials and younger generations. Many of these young adults are still seeking community, but one that allows freedom of questioning, exploration, reflection, and also values diversity. These are the spiritual, but not religious, and they are a significant demographic for Unity's metaphysics and less traditional theology.

As you sit down with your team to move forward with this, start with evaluating what you already have. This guide suggests you ask six questions, and consider them from the perspective of a young adult. Once you see where you have room for growth, create a plan using the action steps provided, or come up with your own. Not all the ideas in this guide will apply to your congregation. Each congregation will be different, have different strengths and growth opportunities, and will need different steps. Do what is right for your congregation.

**To create a young adult inclusive environment, ask yourself the following six questions:**

**1. Is your information accessible?**

Do young adults know how to find you? While the term “marketing” may seem triggering to some, as it can imply proselytization on one hand or business without spirituality on the other hand. In truth, in the age of Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and influencer marketing; any group/community/product/service not actively putting itself out there isn’t worth checking out. If you don’t like the term “marketing,” consider thinking of it as community outreach, promoting awareness, or simply making sure people can find you - your information is accessible. A person needs to see a place mentioned at least four times before they will consider going. The more you can get your name out there, the more likely people of all ages will come to check it out.

**2. Is the environment safe and engaging?**

When a person walks into the front of your building, what do they see? Is the building old, dark, and musty? Does it feel closed in? Think about colors, lighting, and styles that are consistently relevant styles. Remember that a young adult lives in the age of Instagram and TikTok - they want visually appealing spaces with which they can engage. Think about visual cues around diversity and inclusivity. Look at the set up of your sanctuary and fellowship spaces. Consider restrooms and gender and accessibility. Is the building easy to navigate? Think about the language you use, both on and off the platform. A safe environment is just as much about emotional safety as it is physical safety.

**3. Is there representation?**

When a young adult walks into the building, do they see someone who looks like them? If they are the only young adult they can identify, then they may feel like an outsider. They’re going to wonder why there isn’t anyone else there like them. Is there something the other young adults know about this place that this person is missing? This question is also essential when trying to bring in any minority. Are people who look like me at the door? Ushering? On stage? As prayer chaplains or in the book store? There are ways to help this without already having young adults in the congregation. This will change the way your whole community appears, and honestly, many older congregants love to see young people represented too. It helps them feel connected to the next generation and creates a legacy.

**4. Is there something to get behind here?**

When someone walks in your door, can they tell what your mission, vision, and causes are? Many young adults show appreciation through acts of service. Does your community support

any particular projects, movements, or non-profits? Is that information clearly posted and published? Is it easy for a new person to get involved? If you tithe to a local organization, does your entire congregation know how much and to whom? If you have a youth program, are they cherished and lifted up? Young adults have been raised to care about others and act on what they believe in. It's the 5th Principle. They want to be part of a community that reflects that same care and ambition.

## **5. Are young adults made to feel valued and appreciated?**

We spent years raising a generation following the steps of Myrtle Fillmore; teaching them that they have everything they need within them, and helping them realize all that they are. When a young adult joins a community that doesn't engage them, they're not going to waste their time sticking around when the megachurch down the street makes a much bigger effort to involve them. Don't take your young adults for granted. They want to invest time, talent, and treasure in your spiritual community, unless your community is unwilling to invest in them. If you pay it forward by investing in them, they'll do the same for the next group. Young adults want a community. If they just wanted your message, they'd watch it online or listen to a podcast.

## **6. Does the message resonate?**

Okay, so by this point, you've evaluated your quality and quantity of publicly available information, you've created an inviting and inclusive space, you've got some young or younger adults front and center, your tithing and community outreach is evident, and you are investing in your young adults. You've done the hard part, but now you have to figure out if you're meeting *your* mission here. Are you providing spiritual content in a way that young adults can receive it? Think about Sunday messages, and any other content you offer. Young adults don't want to be told what to think. They want a tidbit of wisdom dropped on them that they can apply to their lives. They seek discussion, engagement, and chances to really take that material deeper. A mix of anecdotes, jokes, references, and music reflecting the span of generations, not just your majority age group, will help young adults feel like this message is meant for them too. They're here to learn, but they're not here for a lecture. If you'd like to keep your Sunday message as it is, look at other ways you can engage young adults spiritually outside of Sunday message by adapting other programs or offering new opportunities for engagement.

Having read these, you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed. Take a deep breath. This is totally doable. The following list is a series of strategies compiled by young adults, teens, YFM directors and sponsors, ministers, and more. Within each category, several suggestions are offered, but feel free to create your own too! **Even better, ask some young adults from your congregation to get involved in your plan, and listen to them.** They are your experts. We recommend making a strategic plan with a timeline. Consider the ideas that you can easily implement and focus on those first, but pick out a few long term goals that you would like to

work towards. As your congregation continues to evolve, and more young adults get involved, you may have more people who step up to help with these strategies. You may have growing pains. That's okay. Grow through it. The end result is so worth it.

## **Information Accessibility**

- Create an Instagram. Link it to your Facebook page so that when you post to one, you can automatically post to the other.
- Have a website. Simple is fine. Make sure the service time, full address, phone number and email, and youth services are listed on it.
- Have a Facebook page. This can be simple, or you can use it for promoting spiritual messages and affirmations.
- Look up all the church directories in your area. Make sure your congregation is included. If not, add it.
- Search for your nearest LGBTQIA+ organizations including PFLAG groups. Many of these have their own directories of businesses that are inclusive. If they include places of worship in their directories, contact them to add your community. Include youth and young adult meetings if applicable.
- Look into local print media such as newspapers and magazines. Do they include a church directory? If so, have them add yours. Not a lot of young adults read those, but their family members may do so.
- Send representatives to local meetings. Your town/city probably has coalitions around homelessness, youth issues, and other public health topics and those groups are always looking for representatives from the faith based sector to get involved.
- Is a holiday coming up? Get a group together to represent Unity in the community parade or festival! Even better if you have matching shirts and your young adults and youth involved.
- Look at your community demographics. Where are the young adults living? Consider advertising with local apartment complexes or handing out promotional materials nearby. Remember, handing out information is NOT the same thing as asking them to convert/proselytizing. If that makes you uncomfortable, then hand out cookies while wearing a Unity shirt.
- Is there a college nearby? Consider the following:
  - Reaching out to their Chaplain/Religious Life/Diversity Office and adding your congregation to the church directory
  - Attending religious life open house or fairs, if applicable (typically private vs. public)
  - Attend religious life or cultural events on campus. Lots of these are open to the public. Wear a Unity shirt or go as a group.
  - Hand out cookies during finals week, or host a dog day mixer. In an election year, sign up to register students to vote.

- Create a catchy flyer or postcard to hang up in coffee shops, stores, music venues, etc. Many of these have community boards
- Have flyers or postcards available at yoga studios, wellness centers, New Age stores, and other similarly themed businesses.
- Get your congregants to review the center on Google, Yelp, and Facebook
- Keep your media consistent. Use the same styles, fonts, and colors to create your “brand”

## Safe Environment

- Using inclusive language
  - Relabel “church” as “center,” “community,” “celebration,” etc. The term “church” can be triggering for many adults coming from a traditional religious background in which they experienced trauma or judgment
  - Relabel “service” or “meeting” to terms like “gatherings,” “lessons,” “meetups,” etc. Like “church,” these terms can be triggering, but can also be deterrents for those looking for Principle and spirituality, but not religiosity and rigidity
  - Train all leaders in using gender inclusive language, particularly around pronouns and names
  - Train all leaders in language that is inclusive of mental and physical disabilities
  - Offer a training for the whole community on inclusive language
  - Offer name tags for those who would like to use them
  - Order pins for he/him, she/her, they/them, etc.pronouns
- Physical Space
  - Ensure the building is in good repair and maintenance inside and outside
  - Use a light, airy, and open color scheme as often as possible
  - Decorate with furniture and decor that are long lasting pieces (no posters and folding chairs) but that will also stay stylistically relevant. Think simple furniture that goes with anything - no vintage pieces
  - Create a Hashtagable space - a green wall, a mural, a customized space that will draw people in for photos, whether wedding, graduation, or Instagram
    - Commission a young adult to design your mural, green wall, or artistic space
  - Create a gender neutral bathroom. This can be any single stall lockable bathroom. Just change the sign. Better yet, make sure it is also inclusive of disabilities and is family friendly (changing station or caregiver). Don’t have a single stall bathroom anywhere? Consider making a multi-stall bathroom gender neutral. Floor to ceiling stalls or drapes/paneling to close the stall gaps, and a lack of urinals will help ensure all feel comfortable using it.
  - Create a designated young adult room
  - Make sure your youth groups have designated spaces too
  - Create a coffee shop somewhere. Support a local business and sell their coffee. You could even hire a young adult to run it on Sundays.

- Ensure the building is A.D.A. compliant
- Emotional Space
  - Be unapologetically inclusive. If you truly see the Divine in every being, are you walking that talk? Are you acknowledging a person's lived human experience as well as their spiritual experience? If a person does not feel like their human needs for safety and security are being met, they are unlikely to be open to spiritual vulnerability. By acknowledging human experiences like discrimination and trauma, and creating an intentional space of healing and reconciliation, a spiritual community becomes a beacon of light. By ignoring it, they become complacent in perpetuating societal and systematic problems. And yes, many young adults are going to see it precisely that way.
  - Be compassionate. Many young adults are facing a variety of layered and new challenges. They are adapting to a lot in a short period of time. They will make mistakes. There will be growing pains. Keep supporting their growth.
  - Trust your young adults to know what they are doing. Y.O.U.ers are built into strong leaders, both personally and spiritually. They have a considerable amount of knowledge and training. If a young adult steps into leadership, treat them like you would any other adult. Chances are, they wouldn't have stepped into the position unless they felt they could handle it.
  - Create a space where asking questions is valued. Ask your young adults if they have any questions. Thank them for asking.
  - Offer training on Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma Informed Communities. Open it up to the whole congregation.
  - Accept responsibility for mistakes and mishaps. They happen. Creating a culture of accountability and responsibility will be appreciated by your whole congregation.
    - This also applies when learning a new name or pronouns for someone.
  - Keep young adult and youth groups on the prayer list all year
  - Set clear boundaries with volunteers to avoid feelings of burn out or being taken advantage of
  - Encourage vulnerability

## **Representation**

- On the platform
  - Invite young adult and youth from your congregation to do a Sunday talk
  - Invite in a young adult minister or speaker from somewhere else to do a Sunday talk
  - Invite a speaker who is popular with young adults right now to do a Sunday talk
  - Feature young adult musicians. This is a great way to get college students involved, especially if you can pay them.

- Invite young adults to lead or contribute to a meditation or another part of the service, such as announcements or an introduction
- In the community
  - Greeters and ushers are an easy way to have young adults visible without much training. No young adults yet? How about one of your younger adults or a teen?
  - Get your young adults involved in the book store, A/V, youth programs, fellowship, or other teams.
  - Encourage young adult prayer chaplains
  - Encourage young adults to become members, and offer accessible membership classes, such as after Sunday service or online.
  - Be willing to sign off on service hours for high school or college
  - Create a teen prayer chaplain training program, in which the teens become chaplains for the youth, but transition into the congregational team during their senior year
  - Celebrate your high school and college graduates
  - If you don't have a young adult program, consider supporting a young adult program or group in your city, such as an LGBTQIA+ group or a college program.
- In leadership
  - Encourage young adults to run for the board.
  - Create a designated young adult position on the board.
  - Create a youth position on the board - including youth voices helps retain them as they graduate
  - Hire a young adult to manage your website and social media
  - Hire a young adult to do A/V or for other paid positions you may have available.
  - Offer an internship, paid or unpaid. An intern can receive college credit through their college or university. Internships are training programs, NOT free labor though, so make sure your interns learn valuable and transferable job skills. An internship can be very general or can be specific to a department/ministry such as YFM, music, office, social media, marketing, etc. This is a great way to bring in new talent.
  - Sponsor young adults to become Certified Spiritual Educators, Licensed Unity Teachers, and Ordained Ministers
  - Create a team of young adults to help build young adult engagement
  - Have a NGU director, like you would a YFM Director. If your YFM Director is paid, pay your NGU Director
  - Have a liaison for the NGU or young adult group - this could be the same person your youth or other ministry teams report to

## **Something to Get Behind**

- Local

- Tithe to a local organization
- Offer regular service projects in the community, such as Habitat for Humanity, serving a shelter, collecting food/school supplies/toiletries/etc.
- Sponsor a school, class, or youth center
- Host animal adoptions
- Offer a blood drive
- Collaborate with local coalitions, causes, and movements
- Collaborate with another religious or spiritual organization for a cause
- Collaborate with a college service learning center
- Create a resource guide of local resources for meeting needs, both physical and mental
- Make sure your local efforts are public. It's not about bragging, it's about making sure your whole congregation knows what you stand for.
- Environmental Stewardship
  - Create an earth care ministry or team
  - Cut church waste down as much as possible. Try to go zero waste!
  - Recycle at the very least.
  - Create a community garden.
  - Include environmental stewardship in your prayer
  - Do an energy audit and follow through
  - Research GreenFaith and various other tools to help you take steps towards congregation wide environmental efforts
  - Make sure your environmental efforts are public. It's not about bragging, it's about making sure your whole congregation knows what you stand for.
- Social Action
  - Create a social action team or ministry focused on putting Principle into action. This does not have to be political. Remember, human issues are not inherently political issues, even if they have been politicized. Make that distinction in your work to avoid being called out for politics.
  - Come up with creative solutions on how to support a cause or take a stand. Word smith like a pro and find a way to say what you want to say without using buzzwords that trigger arguments. As an example, you can acknowledge a group's lived experience and the disparities they face, as well as affirm that group's divine nature, all while pointing out resources that work towards a better future.
  - Include social action issues in your prayer list.
  - Make sure your social action efforts are public. It's not about bragging, it's about making sure your whole congregation knows what you stand for.
  - Make a statement. You have a platform, and young adults expect you to use it to promote Unity Principles. Ask people from within the affected community to help write the statement.

## Feeling Valued

- Y.O.U. graduates
  - The Spiritual Leader offers a spiritual counseling session for the graduating seniors each year to give guidance, but also formally invite them to be part of the congregation.
  - The Spiritual Leader follows up with graduates around the time of school starting to check in with them and how they are transitioning to school or work
  - The Care Team/Card Ministry/etc sends a graduation card to the graduates
  - The Care Team/Ministerial Team sends a Daily Word to the recent graduates after summer has ended and they have left Y.O.U.
  - Offer a transition period for Y.O.U.ers during their senior year, in which they meet other ministries and teams
  - Offer a scholarship for Y.O.U. graduates
- Young Adults in General
  - Sponsor Unity education by offering classes or covering costs for credentialing
  - Offer hybridized classes over video chat platforms so young adults can participate
  - Make sure young adults are greeted enthusiastically when they enter on Sundays
  - The Spiritual Leader knows the names of the young adults in the congregation
  - The staff and board know the names of young adults in the congregation
  - Sponsor young adults to attend NGU retreats or other Unity retreats, such as trainings, regional events, women's/men's/lgbtqia+, etc.
  - Create opportunities for young adults to meet each other, such as discussion groups, meetings, or meals. These can be hosted by non-young adults if need be.
  - Offer food or fellowship after service. Young adults really appreciate free or love offering basis food. This is also an excellent chance for leadership and congregants to greet or check in with a young adult.
  - Check in with your young adults. Ask them how they are doing, about their jobs or classes, their stress levels, etc. If they don't show up, send a text message.
  - Focus less on financial tithing, and more on tithing time and talents. Many young adults feel like they don't have money to give, and continually preaching prosperity consciousness at them can actually drive them away. Instead, invite young adults, and all congregants, to give of their time and talent too. Besides, if a volunteer can do something that you would have had to pay someone else to do, then a financial tithe has indeed been given.
    - On this note, be sure to appreciate your volunteers regularly. Use multiple love languages to do so.
    - Furthermore, while we practice tithing as part of our beliefs, we must also be aware that not everyone can tithe, whether time, talent, or money. You cannot pour from an empty cup. If someone is in a place in their life where they cannot give of time, talent, or money, make sure they know they are still loved and supported. When they are in a better place, they will likely tithe to the place that lifted them when they were down.

- Keep supporting young adult programs. Sometimes, it takes multiple attempts to get the right group going. Even if it doesn't look great, keep supporting the attempts. One of them will stick.

## The Teachings

- Get creative in *how* one watches the message.
  - Create a comfortable space to live stream the service that encourages engagement with others - think couches and coffee shop
  - Offer watch parties online that take place in the evening, for those who work the Sunday lunch shift or otherwise can't get there
  - Offer a variety of seating options in your sanctuary. Chairs, tables, floor cushions - mix it up for a more intimate and inclusive vibe
  - Make your recordings available on various shareable platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. If you can live stream to multiple platforms, even better.
- Presenting the message
  - Be willing to be different
  - Find ways to involve the audience - call and repeat, raise your hand,, stand if you are able, discuss with your neighbor, etc.
  - Keep your message short and to the point. Do not over explain. Trust your congregants to figure it out.
  - Meditation is important. Make it a priority.
  - Don't sugarcoat the message. Sometimes the truth can be a little blunt. Be honest.
  - Use anecdotes, music, and jokes that apply to multiple generations, or do a mix from each generation.
  - Show a video or images with your message
  - Sometimes you'll have young adults that just don't relate to a Sunday service. Offer other programs for them to get the message without sitting in service
    - Small groups, meetups, discussions, workshops
    - Meditations, prayer vigils, ceremonies
- Engaging with the message
  - Offer programs, lessons, or workshops that apply spiritual perspective to real life topics that young adults may currently be experiencing (relationships, money, job/career, parenting, "adulting," etc.)
  - Offer opportunities to get deeper, such as a workshop or debrief led by the speaker after service, in-person or online follow up discussion, small groups, etc.\

Thank you for all the support and empowerment you are offering for young adults in Unity!