

## **What Is a Young Adult? Randy Jumper**

What is a young adult? This might seem like a basic question with an easy answer. After all, as a young adult leader, you likely have a clear sense of who qualifies as a young adult. It's the people God's called you to minister to!

But anyone involved in young adult ministry knows this fundamental question doesn't always have a straightforward answer. Opinions vary widely about what constitutes young adulthood. Some churches define it as ages eighteen to thirty-five, others limit it to those in their twenties, and some have no definition at all. Most use vague age ranges without clear guidelines. So, what is a young adult, and what ages should your young adult ministry focus on?

### **Young Adulthood: A Sociological Perspective**

The concept of young adulthood is a relatively new sociological construct. While children, adolescents, and older adults have been studied extensively for centuries, serious exploration into young adulthood began in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Churches have spent even less time developing resources targeting young adults. Once you left youth group, you were considered an adult! Welcome to Women's Ministry and Men's Ministry. While college campus ministries have thrived, local church ministries for young adults have often been absent. If anything, young adults in the local church often are recruited to work as youth sponsors.

### **Defining Young Adults: Age vs. Stage**

Young adulthood is best understood not merely as an age but as a stage of life. It represents the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Sociologist Jeffrey Arnett uses the term "emerging adulthood" to encapsulate the complexities of this transitional phase.<sup>2</sup> Young adults straddle two worlds—adolescence and adulthood—simultaneously.

Young adults are individuals in a transitional stage of life, typically between ages eighteen and twenty-nine, navigating the migration from adolescence to

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<sup>1</sup> Fred R. Wilson, "Teaching Young Adults," in *The Christian Educators Handbook on Adult Education*, ed. Kenneth Gangel and James Wilhoit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 191.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

adulthood.<sup>3</sup> Age ranges are helpful, but come up short by phenomena such as delayed adolescence and early-onset puberty. While most agree that a twenty-one-year-old is a young adult, society increasingly sees teenagers displaying adultlike behavior earlier, while some twenty-somethings exhibit prolonged adolescence.

Chuck Bomar, a young adult ministry leader, identifies key benchmarks of young adulthood: finishing school, moving out of the home, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child.<sup>4</sup> However, these milestones have become increasingly fluid, further blurring the lines of young adulthood.

### **Practical Ministry Implications**

Defining young adulthood isn't just an academic exercise; it has real implications for ministry. Based on conversations with young adult leaders, most agree that the target demographic should be ages eighteen to thirtyish. Some ministries, like ours, welcome high school seniors before they graduate, while others require young adults to have completed high school. A few have no specific rules.

Our ministry focuses on college-age students and twenty-somethings. While we don't "card people at the door," most attendees over thirty naturally transition out due to our messaging and programming, which is geared toward younger audiences. Those who stay longer are encouraged to become leaders. However, this is rare and almost never happens with single people over thirty-five.

### **Staying True to Your Ministry's Assignment**

Define your ministry's target demographic, and resist allowing non-young adults to dominate your space. For example, several years ago, our young adult service grew significantly, but upon closer evaluation, we found that over half the attendees were over forty. While we value intergenerational ministry, many of these older attendees were not actively ministering to young adults but simply enjoying the youthful atmosphere.

In response, we adjusted our activities and programming. Over three months, attendance dropped by 40 percent. While that was difficult, it was the right

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<sup>3</sup> I understand the limitations of a North American focus. As the problem I address is retention in North American churches, I focus attention here. *The Connected Generation* from Barna Research reveals international young adult trends.

<sup>4</sup> Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart: Understanding the Mindset and Values of 18-25-Year-Olds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 24.

decision. Focusing on our assignment—ministering to young adults—was more important than maintaining crowd size.

## **Conclusion**

As a young adult leader, define your assignment and stick with it. Get input and expectations from your leadership and reach your young adults! Prioritize your mission over numbers, and craft a ministry that genuinely serves the young adult demographic. With clarity and intentionality, your ministry can make a meaningful impact on this pivotal stage of life.