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## Study guide

### Lessons from campus ministry

By Robert C. Blezard

Have you heard that today's youth and young adults don't want anything to do with religion and there's nothing we can do to get them interested in church? That would be news to the more than 240 Lutheran campus ministries that provide life-giving, transformative ministry to thousands of young adults. A two-year study helped zero in on what is working at these campus ministries. Congregations can learn much from their success.

#### Exercise 1: "What's the matter with kids today?"

The famous line from "Kids," a song from the 1963 musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, proves that generational differences aren't a 21st-century phenomenon. Every generation establishes its own unique character and interacts with the world in ways that are different from their parents, grandparents and other forebears. Today's youth and young adults are no different. From your interactions with people of different generations, what do you see?

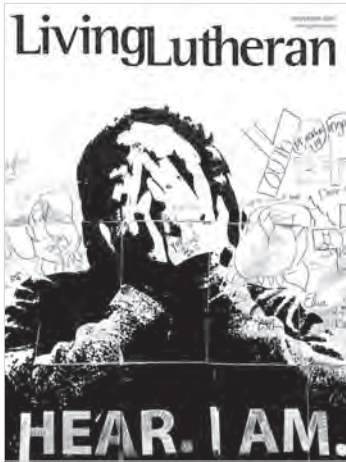
Start the discussion by asking study group participants to name the generation with which they identify and briefly describe what they see as the chief characteristics that make their generation unique. When done, discuss:

- Did everybody describe their generation accurately? What did they get right? What would you disagree with?
- Why does every generation have its own unique character?
- How would you describe today's young adult generation? What are the characteristics that distinguish it from previous generations?
- When it comes to church life, what are the implications of generational differences? How have those differences evidenced themselves in church?
- What did you learn from this exercise?

#### Exercise 2: Keeping up with changes

Though cellphones, the internet and computers are familiar and integral parts of life today, people as young as 50 may remember when all phones were plugged into the wall, the internet was a fantasy, and clunky refrigerator-sized computers were only used in businesses, schools and government offices. These technological wonders alone reveal how much our world has changed in a generation or two.

- What do you see as the biggest changes to life since you were a child? What's been for the better? What's been for the worse?
- How has technology affected how we live and relate to one another? For good? For bad?



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## Study guide: **Lessons from campus ministry** *continued*

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- How have people's attitudes, tastes and approaches to relationships changed in that time?
- How have changes in technology and people affected church life?
- At the same time that these dramatic changes have affected our society, how has your church changed?
- What is your church doing the same as it was 40 years ago in programs, worship and outreach? What is your church doing now that it wasn't doing 40 years ago?
- How has your church kept up with changes? What more needs to be done? In what ways does your congregation need to catch up? How can it do that?

### Exercise 3: Absent young adults

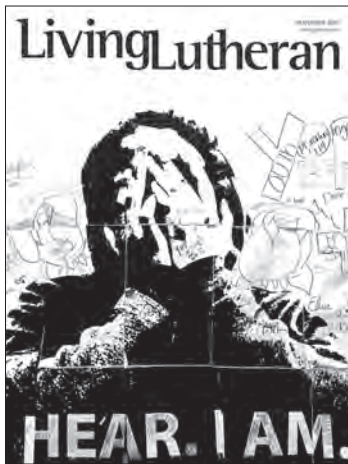
Leaders in many Lutheran congregations lament the lack of youth and young adults in their communities. Discuss how your congregation is doing.

- How many young people do you have in worship on a given Sunday? In the community as a whole? Is that up or down from 10 years ago? Twenty years ago? Thirty years ago? If different, how would you explain it? If the same, what factors would account for it?
- How has your congregation engaged with, talked with and explored with youth and young adults to understand better their desires, observations and hopes for church life? Why would such a dialogue be important?
- What is your congregation willing to change in order to make church life more attractive to youth and young adults?

### Exercise 4: The "magic formula"?

Struggling with a shortage of youth and young adults, many congregational leaders wonder, "What are we doing wrong?" "Is there anything we can do?" They may wonder what "magic formula" could bring youth and young adults back to church.

- Why is a mix of ages and life experiences healthy for church life? How does it affect church life when there isn't a good mix of ages and life experiences?
- Has your congregation struggled to attract young adults? Since when? Explain.
- What has your congregation done by way of programs, worship, outreach and other efforts to retain or attract youth and young adults? What has worked well? Why? What has worked somewhat? Why? What has not worked? Why?
- How much is your church willing to embrace change to accommodate and attract younger people? Changes in worship? Programs? Outreach? Schedule?
- Is your congregation in search of a "magic formula"? Does one exist?
- How has your congregation engaged with, talked with and explored with



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## Study guide: **Lessons from campus ministry** *continued*

youth and young adults to understand better their desires, observations and hopes for church life? Why would such a dialogue be important?

### Exercise 5: Expansively welcoming

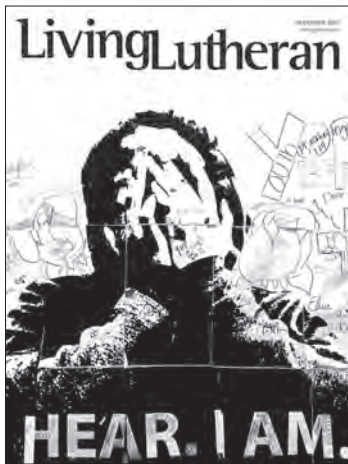
The campus ministry study found that participants valued faith communities that were especially welcoming and supportive, especially of people who may face marginalization from other segments of society. Students identified as a critical test for inclusion a community's support and welcome of people who identify as LGBTQ+. Discuss:

- How would you rate your congregation when it comes to welcoming others? Explain.
- How does your congregation "welcome" visitors? Describe in detail your congregation's strategy or practice of welcoming others. Is it a "one-size-fits-all" approach?
- How welcoming is your congregation to visitors or neighbors who may not fit the mold of the majority of your congregation? Explain.
- Discuss how welcoming your congregation is to people who belong to the following categories—explain why and how, specifically. Non-Lutherans. Unchurched. Older people. Younger people. The poor. The wealthy. The educated. The uneducated. Those of a different race. Native-born Americans. Immigrants. Neighbors. Out-of-towners. Able-bodied. Differently abled. Heterosexual. LGBTQ+.

### Exercise 6: Generation LGBTQ+

Even 10 years after the ELCA's 2009 statement on human sexuality affirmed that sexual expressions besides heterosexuality were also gifts from God, the issue of inclusion and support for LGBTQ+ people remains controversial with some congregations and people in our denomination. Yet evidence shows that for many young people today, LGBTQ+ rights are a given, not a matter open for discussion. The campus ministry study supports the notion that young people wouldn't feel comfortable in a congregation that didn't support and affirm LGBTQ+ people. This presents challenges and opportunities for congregations that seek to serve youth and young adults. Discuss:

- What are your congregation's prevailing attitudes toward inclusion and support for LGBTQ+ people? How do you know? Are those attitudes spoken or unspoken? Written or unwritten? Have they been challenged or confirmed through community discussion?
- If LGBTQ+ acceptance and inclusion is a "deal-breaker" issue for young adult visitors at a church, would they feel good about joining your congregation? Why or why not? Does this need to be addressed?
- Has your congregation discussed the 2009 social statement on human sexuality ([elca.org/socialstatements](http://elca.org/socialstatements)) or, more generally, inclusion of LGBTQ+



## Study guide: **Lessons from campus ministry** *continued*

individuals? If so, what was the result of the discussion? If not, why not?

- Since it is an important area of concern for youth and young adults, should inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people be a more prominent topic in your congregation's study, education, outreach and programming? Why or why not?
- In the 10 years since the ELCA adopted its statement on sexuality, our culture has moved significantly in the area of LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion. Has your church's response similarly evolved? Is it time to revisit the issue? How might that be done?

### **Exercise 7: Relevant faith formation**

The study revealed that ELCA campus ministries thrived because they addressed the deep spiritual hunger experienced by youth and young adults, helping them to grow stronger in the faith.

- How does your congregation help people grow in faith? What programs, events or practices cultivate faith? Is there something for people of all ages? How does your congregation keep those programs fresh and innovative?
- Is there a strategy, policy, vision or mission statement that guides the work in faith formation? If one exists, does it need updating? If there is none, would it be helpful to encourage or assist leaders in developing one?
- What faith disciplines or practices does your congregation regularly promote to help people grow in their faith? Are these sufficient? What others might be helpful?
- Worship is a primary avenue for faith formation. Describe the worship in your congregation. Is it innovative? Is it authentic? What do youth and young adults think of it? Does it need updating or freshening to meet the needs and expectations of youth and young adults?

### **Exercise 7: Engaging life's problems**

Youth and young adults valued how ELCA campus ministries assisted them with their personal struggles and also addressed important social issues of the day. Would they find that at your congregation as well?

- How well does your congregation offer "safe" places where people can share with one another the trials and issues they are facing? If someone from your congregation is struggling with a personal issue, how would members work to help support, encourage and assist that person?
- What else could your congregation do to create a safe space for people to share and struggle? How can it better serve members in need?
- God cares about our world and the people in it. Describe the efforts your congregation makes to offer discussion and education about our Christian response to issues confronting our nation and world, such as gun violence,

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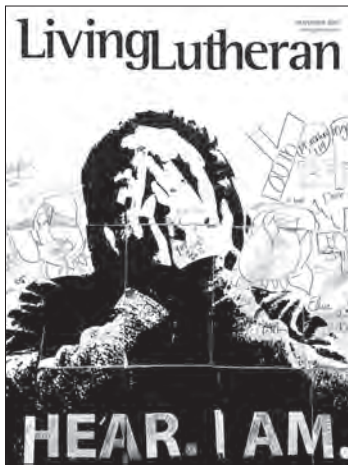
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## Study guide: **Lessons from campus ministry** *continued*

climate change, armed conflict, immigration and income inequality? Are these efforts to encourage theological reflection and action on issues of the day sufficient? What more might be done?

### Exercise 8: Service and leadership

It's clear from the survey and other sources that today's youth and young adults don't want to be passive and inactive members of a congregation, *nor* do they want to be members of a passive and inactive congregation. Instead, they want to be part of a congregation that serves the community and world around them and also offers them avenues to be leaders.

- Would you characterize your congregation as active and involved in the world, or passive and disengaged? Explain.
- In what ways does your congregation engage with its surrounding neighbors and respond to their needs? Your state or region? Our world? Are these efforts sufficient?
- How does your congregation value mission and service as a priority for being a Christian worshiping community? How is that value expressed?
- If a group of young people joined your congregation and was looking for ways to help and serve the community, what opportunities would they find?
- Consider your congregation's leadership. What intentional efforts are there to equip members for positions of responsibility and to create opportunities for them to lead? What could you do better?

### Exercise 9: Summary

The campus ministry study provides keen insights into the spiritual needs and desires of youth and young adults whom they are reaching successfully. After reading the article, discuss what they can tell you about your congregation's efforts to bring more youth and young adults into church life:

- Why are the ELCA campus ministries successful in ministering to young adults?
- What approaches and attitudes are present in campus ministries that make them attractive to young adults? Do those attitudes and approaches exist in your congregation? What can be done about it?
- What programs in education, outreach and service make campus ministry effective? Does your congregation have similar offerings? What would be a helpful response?
- In what direction does your congregation need to go to be more successful in ministering to youth and young adults?

**For action:** Brainstorm an "action menu" of at least 25 things your congregation can do to bring more youth and young adults to your church, or to engage them in ministry.

# Lessons from campus ministry

By Megan Brandsrud

More than 240 Lutheran campus ministries provide an ELCA presence at state and private colleges and universities across the country. They minister to everyone in their academic settings—not just students and not just Lutherans—as they seek to engage people in what it means to be a community that reflects the life of Christ.

This mission is lived out in various ways from ministry to ministry and is shaped by many factors, including regional demographics, leadership and even the ministry’s physical context. A ministry that operates out of its own campus center or a shared

space with ecumenical partners functions differently from those that are parish-based or that work out of houses on campus.

To echo a common phrase among campus ministry: “If you’ve seen one campus ministry setting, you’ve seen one.”

Despite these differences, a common denominator among Lutheran campus ministries is that they serve among one of the largest communities of young adults in the country aside from the military. Hoping to learn the impact of these programs and what young adults are saying about their lives, their faith and the

## Student Faith Communities: THREE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS

Students found these faith communities personally impactful and dependable, especially in times of need.



**Expansively welcoming**

The community was intentionally welcoming and supportive of young adults including those who were excluded by other segments of society. The litmus test for this element was outspoken inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons.



**Grounded in Christian faith**

The Lutheran Campus Ministry community’s identity was centered in a thoughtful and progressive understanding of the Christian faith and its teachings.



**Reaching out to others in service**

The community made a difference in other’s lives and provided students with opportunities to participate in these meaningful service activities.



**Lutheran Campus Ministry’s unique experience of BELONGING AND SUPPORT**

Charts: Lutheran Campus Ministry Study/Lutheran Campus Ministry Network

church, the Lutheran Campus Ministry Network (LuMin; [lumin-network.com](http://lumin-network.com)) conducted a two-year research project that culminated in 2018.

The first-of-its-kind study consisted of a literature review, site visits and in-person interviews on six campuses. LuMin surveyed 845 students participating in campus ministry and conducted phone interviews with 10 campus pastors and ministers.

The findings provided information that's valuable not only for campus ministry practitioners but also for congregations across the country that wonder why young adults aren't filling their pews.

### Welcome and inclusive

Roland Martinson, professor emeritus of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., was a lead researcher for the Lutheran Campus Ministry Study. He said the

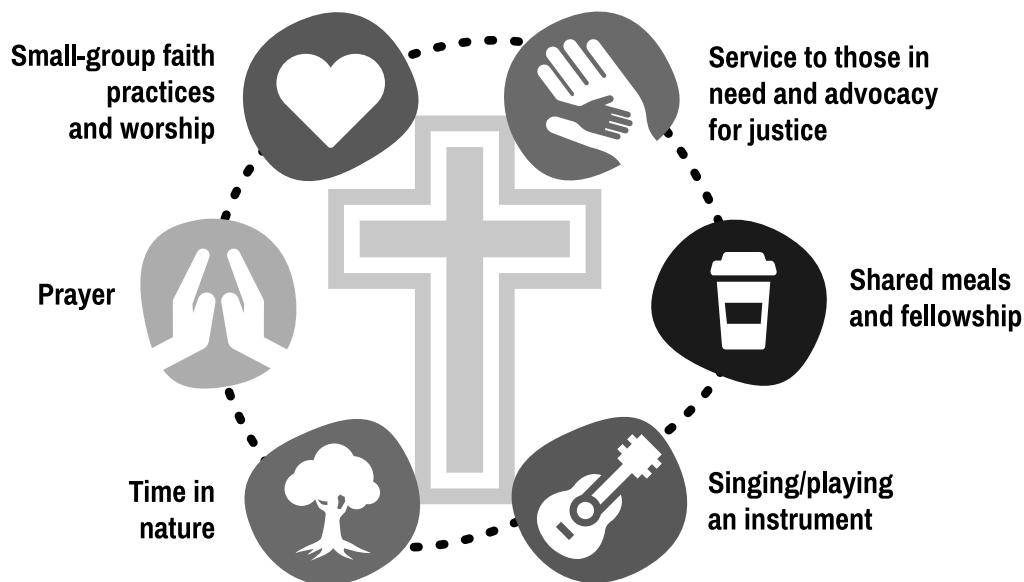
some campuses we are one of the only Christian ministries to be openly welcoming of students who are LGBTQ.

"Both in my work as a campus pastor but also in getting around to others over the past five years, I've seen it over and over again: students who were disillusioned by the church or put off by other religious groups found a place that was welcoming."

Megan Kleen, a sophomore at the University of Montana in Missoula, said the emphasis on everyone being welcome is what drew her to Emmaus, the campus ministry. "Growing up in an LCMS (Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod) church, I can get a little spooked about church, but the community [at Emmaus] kept me coming back," she said.

"The thing that struck me about Emmaus is no one tried to invalidate others' stories and fully

## Where do young adults feel most CONNECTED TO GOD?



results reveal that Lutheran campus ministries make an impact, and the most common characteristic students referenced as being transformative was the sense of a quality, anchoring community. In fact, 97% of students said Lutheran campus ministry provides a welcoming, inclusive and safe place.

"I think it's true that the campus ministries live out this principle of having a very welcoming, open, diverse, affirming community in ways that are really quite profound," said Don Romsa, who retired in August as ELCA director for campus ministry. "On

accepted them. If it was sad or concerning, they were there for you if you needed it, but they didn't try to say, 'You shouldn't feel that way' about a certain issue. There is open, inclusive conversation. It's safe. People aren't going to judge me, which is incredible."

Emma Schmick, a junior at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, said she had a challenging roommate situation and was considering transferring schools until she found the Lutheran campus ministry. Now she's on her second year of living in

# STUDENT PERCEPTIONS of the Ministry

## What do students say about campus ministry?

“It is effective at reaching out to the campus community.”

68%

“It helps me grow in my faith and spiritual life (worship, Bible study, discussion groups, etc.)”

83%

87%

“It provides students with important leadership roles in the ministry.”

“It provides a welcoming, inclusive, and safe space.”

97%

“It has helped me through a difficult time in my life.”

61%

80%

“It provides meaningful opportunities for service to people in need, for advocacy, and for works of justice.”

“It has had a significant impact on my life.”

84%



the campus ministry house. “I was nervous going into a new setting, but it was a super-welcoming community, and felt safe and comfortable,” she said. “I like that everyone who lives here is different but has the same core values.”

The community, she added, made her feel comfortable to open up, ask questions and learn more about herself: “I think because it is such a safe place and you’re with people you know have similar values, it gives you the opportunity to find yourself and your voice and have confidence to use it.”

The kind of safe, welcoming community that students said they find in campus ministry creates an environment where they feel they can talk openly about challenges and find support. This can be especially meaningful as it relates to mental health concerns.

Several national studies over the past few years have reported that mental health issues on campuses continue to rise, and students who were surveyed for the LuMin study were no exception: 49% reported feeling overwhelming anxiety at least monthly, and 23% said they have seriously considered suicide.

Lutheran Campus Ministry–Clemson, a parish-based ministry, took the research findings seriously and started the Mood Disorders Support

Group, where students meet with a member of the congregation who is a licensed social worker.

“Suicide is way too pervasive and, on campuses, in many of our minds, is an epidemic,” said Chris Heavner, who retired in August as pastor of the Clemson ministry. “We are very aware of the way in which students come onto campus these days with more pressure on them than they can handle. They’re overwhelmed by the realities of the world. Campus ministry is faithfully addressing and caring for that.”

John Lund, pastor of Emmaus, said Lutheran campus ministry is one of the only contexts in which

“I think because it is such a safe place and you’re with people you know have similar values, it gives you the opportunity to find yourself and your voice and have confidence to use it.”





students, even those who grew up in the ELCA, have space to talk about complex subjects.

“It’s different across the country, but we don’t have a lot of youth groups or even camps where they’re talking about things like ethics or sexuality or race,” he said. “And those are the conversations they’re dying to have. There’s a desire to have this place where [they can say], ‘I can feel like myself and these are my people, and we’re going to talk about important things to help figure out who I am and what I’m about.’”

### Relevant faith formation

Many of the students surveyed, especially those who had an active faith life at home, reported that Lutheran campus ministry offered a continuation and an expansion of their faith journey. Of those surveyed, 76% said growing their faith was an important reason for being involved in campus ministry, and 62% said they pray weekly or more.

“I think our campus ministries do a really good job at nurturing what we would call the simple faith practices of young adults,” Romsa said. “Some young adults take on a prayer life that is pretty powerful as a result of being a part of Lutheran campus ministry.”

Students named other practices that made them feel connected to God, including time in nature, service projects, singing or playing an instrument, and sharing meals. But most cited worship as the

No. 1 practice that connected them to God. And while 84% of the students said they worship weekly or more, Martinson said it’s important to note campus ministries don’t necessarily follow the traditional Lutheran service.

“They’re faithful yet innovative,” Martinson said. “They grow out of Lutheran theology and many employ its vocabulary of grace and vocation, and worship services are highly interactive and draw out experiences of students.”

Lund said Emmaus had to rethink its worship style after interest waned a lot. “The last couple of years we’ve done something called ‘Unplugged’ that has elements of worship, and we frame it differently,” he said. “We pull in art, stories, creativity. It’s just a different spiritual space.”

Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities experienced an opposite shift in worship interest a few years ago, said its pastor, Kate Reuer Welton.

“Around 2015, a class of students showed up,” she said. “They leaned in and were spiritually hungry in a way I hadn’t experienced before. Engagement and outreach programs that our ministry previously relied on were flopping, but all of the students were coming to worship.”

“Generation Z has had to perform socially and academically since they were very young, and with the

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS of a vital young adult faith community:

What do students say are the key characteristics of a VITAL young adult faith community?



A welcoming, inclusive and affirming community

Opportunities for genuine leadership in the faith community

A safe place to explore faith and life

Opportunities to provide meaningful service to people in need and advocate for justice

An environment that offers support in difficult and challenging times

# Lutheran Campus Ministry participants: A HOPEFUL SIGN!

83%

agreed that they have  
**important things to offer**  
the church and the world



1 in 12

of the young adults indicated they were interested in a **professional career in the church**, including rostered ministry of Word and Sacrament, or Word and Service.



economic and political instability they've experienced, it's apparent that nothing is a given. And that makes them hungry for the gospel."

Students also indicated that campus ministry provides a space where they can ask challenging questions, express doubt and have conversations about faith that are relevant to their lives.

At the University of Minnesota ministry, students are placed into small groups where, Reuer Welton said, they can "have meaningful conversations and work together to figure out how to recognize God in their daily life."

"They have a general sense about who God is and an idea about what faith in action looks like, but they don't have a lot of practice saying what they believe about God, so we're trying to give them words to speak into that," she added.

Rachel Young Binter, pastor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, said the campus ministry also helps students learn how to articulate their faith tradition. "We're learning how to articulate to

"I feel like, as the ELCA has taken more public and important stands, the young adults I'm working with want to identify with this church."



the world our deeply held beliefs around Scripture and the hope and love of God in Jesus Christ, and how that's counter to some of the articulation of Christianity in the world," she said, adding that she's heard from several students that they'd rather say they're Lutheran than say they're Christian.

"I feel like, as the ELCA has taken more public and important stands, the young adults I'm working with want to identify with this church," Binter said. "They'd rather say they're Lutheran because it stands for something—a form of Christianity that has integrity and meaning and purpose in the world."

## Engaged and eager

Two substantial findings from the research project: 84% of students reported that Lutheran campus ministry had a significant impact on their lives, and 89% indicated that they plan to remain active in a religious community as adults.

Congregations lamenting that young people aren't interested in church anymore might well note these figures and study the practices of Lutheran campus ministries to better involve young adults.

"Young adults are very engaged and committed to the church, but they may not show that in the same way their grandparents did, by building buildings," Heavner said. "We've learned [which] faith communities are more attractive to this generation of followers of Jesus, so what does this tell us about forming communities? We are Lutheran because the church was courageous to become something different, so let's make sure we aren't confined by a traditional idea of community."

Binter agreed, saying young adults are looking for a radically welcoming community that models the life of Christ and gives them opportunity to be a leader in it. “I think young adults are calling us to be a church of integrity, and that’s a good thing for the church,” she said. “Eighty-three percent said they see themselves as important to the church and the world. They are getting our message that they have gifts to share, that they have leadership to give us.”

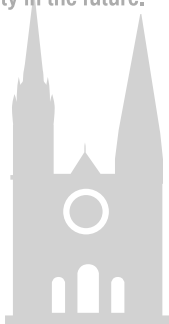
“As young adults are visiting new congregations, are they being invited into leadership positions and are their ideas being welcomed?”

ministry houses and helping plan worship. But now that he’s left campus and returned to his hometown of Boise, Idaho, he’s having a difficult time finding a congregation to call home. Even the congregation he grew up in doesn’t feel like a good fit after his experience in a campus ministry context.

“A lot of the congregations don’t seem like they’re as in tune to the younger generations as much as they maybe think their church plan includes that kind of outreach,” he said. “I love going to a regular worship service every once in a while because it gives me a calming sense of peace because I grew up

## FUTURE INVOLVEMENT in a Faith Community

**43%** of 18-23 year olds in the National Study of Youth and Religion plan to **be involved** in a religious community in the future.



**89%** of young adults involved in LCM Student Faith Communities indicated they plan to **remain active** in a religious community as adults.



Lund sees young adult leadership being invested on a national level through programs such as Young Adults in Global Mission ([elca.org/yagm](http://elca.org/yagm)), but congregations are struggling to harness this power. “Our congregations might want to slot young adults into existing leadership, and I’m not seeing a lot of our young adults who are finding that terribly exciting,” he said. “Their perception is that congregations are set up to comfort people and it’s a community that feels primarily passive. No one has talked about climate change or immigration and these



“The church isn’t dead.”

Micah Drew, a recent graduate of the University of Montana, was active in Emmaus as a student, including living in one of the campus

big questions they carry with them. It’s not true for all, but it’s what many young adults experience.”

with it, but I don’t get the conversations there that I’m looking for.”

Reuer Welton hopes that some of the transferrable practices of Lutheran campus ministries can be catalysts for generational change and contribute to the overall flourishing of ELCA congregations across the country. “There are 50 to 60 students who tromp through the snow when it’s below zero at 9 o’clock at night to get to worship,” she said. “The church isn’t dead.”

“This study points to ways it’s changing and may be different in the future, but the Holy Spirit is alive and well.”

Download a study guide at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



**Megan Brandsrud** is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.