

Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016. 336 pp.

The church in the Western world is facing an exodus of young people. Most churchgoers know this anecdotally. Some major research projects have analyzed the demographic trends, sought to explain why, and most importantly pointed in directions to help reverse the trend. One of the most influential hubs for such research is the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), directed by Kara Powell. Her recent book, *Growing Young*, describes the findings and implications from their 2012-2015 Churches Engaging Young People (CEYP, pronounced “keep”) Project.

Instead of focusing on the aging demographic in churches or what most churches are not doing to engage youth, this study looks at what many churches are doing to begin “growing young.” What can churches do to help young people passionately connect with God through a faith community? It dispels myths that churches growing young need to be a precise size, off-the-charts cool, have a big budget or building, and/or have a hyper-entertaining program with watered down teaching.

There were 60 people involved in the project, researching 259 congregations and going deeper with 41 exemplary churches including interviews with 535 young people, parents, volunteers and staff. It was a comprehensive project and helpful to read about the methodology in the appendix. The project found that the Churches with proven effectiveness in engaging young people displayed six core commitments:

1. Unlock keychain leadership – empowering others especially young people to let lose their creativity
2. Empathize with today’s young people – rather than judging or criticizing
3. Take Jesus’s message seriously – and invite people to a Jesus-centered life (and avoid focusing on abstract beliefs, formulaic claims as well as “moralistic therapeutic deism”)

4. Fuel a warm community – peer and intergenerational friendships are more important than cool programs
5. Prioritize young people (and their families) everywhere – involve and support them generously
6. Be the best neighbors – and invite young people to join in with neighborhood mission

The chapter on each core commitment includes illustrative stories and ideas for action, and a separate chapter unpacks a plan for change. The writers stress this is not just for well-resourced large churches but for communities of different shapes and sizes.

One of the most significant findings is that evangelism is not dead among young people but takes different forms. It must not necessarily involve certainty and confrontation but honesty and listening, or more conversations and less conclusions.

Perhaps its most important finding is what ultimate questions young people are asking, and what they foundationally need:

- Identity: Who am I? (scrutinizing “me”)
- Belonging: Where do I fit (exploring “us”)
- Purpose: What difference do I make (wondering about “our world”) (pp.95, 115-6)

Powell et.al. urge responding to these questions with grace, love and mission. These are the qualities the church holds intrinsically, and which best address young people’s painful dilemmas and searching. People ask these questions at all life stages, but they are especially acute for younger generations, and they are asking them earlier and later, and thus longer.

*Growing Young* is a thoroughly-researched yet broadly accessible book that deserves to be on the desk or device of generational ministry leaders, youth evangelists and those teaching or resourcing them. It would be an ideal text for undergraduate youth ministry but

also a model research design or conversation partner for higher degree students researching evangelism among young adults. More details are at <[ChurchesGrowingYoung.org](http://ChurchesGrowingYoung.org)>.