Identity, Belonging, and Purpose

New research on 3 big questions that change every teenager

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Abstract

This presentation will explore current research into adolescent narratives about identity, belonging, and purpose. Qualitative research included three interviews of up to two hours each with 27 diverse teenagers from across the country. Additional survey data were analyzed from over 2,200 high school students, as well as an extensive literature review focused on Generation Z and cross-disciplinary research. Our presentation will combine statistics with qualitative insights and offer implications for youth ministry educators.

Introduction

Every teenager is a walking bundle of questions. For adolescents around us, the questions in their driver's seat may be about friends, race, money, grades, abuse, justice, sports, future, family, social media, or mental health. Sometimes their questions leak out and are muttered aloud. More commonly, they remain bottled inside a teenager's curious mind and conflicted soul.

From our research, we propose that today's adolescents wrestle with three key questions underlying the rest:

> Who am I?

> Where do I fit?

> What difference can I make?

The first is a question of *identity*, which we define as *our view of ourselves*.

The second question is about *belonging*, defined as *our connection with others*.

Finally, the third question is about *purpose*, or *our contribution to the world*.

While the nuances of these questions vary by context, young people's struggle to derive meaningful answers—ultimately found in the person and work of Jesus Christ—keeps them from experiencing all God intends. As young people drift from faith, they also drift from the church. One compilation of data projects that over one million young people raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from Christianity this year—and every year for the next 30 years.[1] What's more, churches missing young people end up missing the vitality, creativity, insight, and passion young people provide.

For over fifteen years, we have been trying to answer questions about young people's faith through our research at the Fuller Youth Institute. Many of those questions come from leaders, parents, and mentors who worry about the young people around them. What has become intriguing to us in recent years is the way today's generation of young people, part of the Generation Z cohort, are often spoken about in ministry training, writing, and conversation in broad generalizations leftover from Millennials.

For example, one of the frequently-cited studies among youth ministry research is the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), spearheaded by sociologist Christian Smith. The NSYR began in 2002 with a nationally representative sample of youth ages 13 to 17 and followed these same young people through four waves of surveys, ending when they were between the ages of 23 and 28 in 2013.[2] In other words, when we quote NSYR findings today, we're talking about teenagers from 20 years ago, many of whom are nearing age 40.

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[1] This data is compiled from four studies: the Religious Landscape Study produced by the Pew Research Center (in 2007 and 2014), the Baylor Religion Study (2007-2011), the PRRI/RNS September 2016 survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, and the Gallup Annual Religion Surveys (1992-2016). See The Pinetops Foundation, *The Great Opportunity*, 18.
[2] See https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/research-design/.

Millennials have certainly received more than their share of negative labels. Born between 1980 and 2000, the millennial generation has been tagged "lazy," "entitled," and "narcissistic."[3] The generation of teenagers currently in front of us is post-millennial, and they are often known as either iGen or Gen Z. No young person, let alone an entire generation, can be summarized with a few adjectives. Yet we've found these three descriptors helpful in understanding the teenagers around us: *anxious, adaptive*, and *diverse*.

Young people are *anxious* because of external stressors, which easily become internal pressure. Almost every teenager feels stressed regularly. In our interviews, every single student felt anxious at times, and typically far more often than they wished. Anxiety is the most common psychological disorder in the US, affecting nearly one-third of adolescents and adults in their lifetime.[4] Seventy percent of teenagers in one recent study consider anxiety and depression a "major problem" among their generation.[5]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges skyrocketed in the US. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, anxiety tripled (from 8.1 percent to 25.5 percent) and depression almost quadrupled (from 6.5 percent to 24.3 percent). Approximately half of young adults ages eighteen to twenty-four during the pandemic were wrestling with anxiety or depression.[6] A recent report from the University of Michigan's C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health found that one in three teen girls and one in five teen boys have experienced new or worsening anxiety since March 2020.[7]

Adolescents are *adaptive* as they adjust with creativity and agility to the new needs and opportunities they face. The pandemic has not only been a source of anxiety; it has become this generation's defining moment. Born post-9/11 and living through a childhood shadowed by economic recession and school massacres like Sandy Hook and Parkland, young people are coming of age in a pandemic-stricken world and a country grappling with racial and political strife.

This is also the "smartphone generation," having grown up with touchscreen technology and a mobile app-driven world. According to the latest research, nearly all (95 percent) of US teens have access to a smartphone, and about half say they are "almost constantly" on the internet.[8]

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[3] Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (New York: Little, Brown, 2017), 3–12.

[4] Harvard Medical School*,* "Data Table 1: Lifetime Prevalence DSM-IV/WMH-CIDI Disorders by Sex and Cohort," "National Comorbidity Survey (NCS)," 2007, https://www.hcp.med.harvard.edu/ncs/index.php; and Borwin Bandelow and Sophie Michaelis, "Epidemiology of Anxiety Disorders in the 21st Century," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 17, no. 3 (September 2015): 327–35.

[5] Karen Zraick, "Teenagers Say Depression and Anxiety Are Major Issues Among Their Peers," *The New York Times Online*, Feb. 26, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/health/teenage-depression-statistics.html, and the referenced Pew Research Center study, Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Nikki Graf, "Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers," Feb. 20, 2019, https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/.

[6] M. É. Czeisler et al. "Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation during the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020," *Morbidity Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 32 (August 14, 2020), 1049–57, http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1.

[7] University of Michigan Health, "How the pandemic has impacted teen mental health," 38, no. 2 (March 15, 2021), https://mottpoll.org/reports/how-pandemic-has-impacted-teen-mental-health. See also https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/well/family/teen-anxiety-myths.html.

[8] Forty-five percent. Katherine Schaeffer, "Most U.S. Teens Who Use Cellphones Do It to Pass Time, Connect with Others, Learn New Things," Pew Research Center, August 23, 2019,

While Millennials grew up with the internet available on home computers (via dial-up connections), for Gen Z, the internet has always been ubiquitous and pervasive in every aspect of life. This access presents endless opportunities for creative expression and demands constant adaptation to an ever-shifting landscape of apps, platforms, and technological innovations.

Finally, this cohort of young people is *diverse* in their ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender identity, values, and worldview. Today in the US, roughly half of those under eighteen are White and half are people of color;[9] one-fourth of that same age group are first- or second-generation immigrants.[10] One in two US teenagers today are living in poverty or low-income households.[11] This income inequality creates a disparity that colors their search for answers to their pressing questions and hinders access to resources they need to navigate today's world.

Young people are also growing up in a shifting social landscape regarding sexual and gender identity. In 2016, about ten million people, or 4.1 percent of the US adult population, identified as LGBTQ, which is a modest, but noteworthy, increase from the 8.3 million (or 3.5 percent of adults) who said they were LGBTQ in 2012.[12] In one national study across generations, the youngest cohort surveyed (young adults ages eighteen to thirty-six) was by far the most likely to identify as LGBTQ (7.3 percent).[13] In addition, it's estimated that somewhere between 0.7 percent and 1.8 percent of US high school students identify as transgender.[14]

Our research team at the Fuller Youth Institute set out to listen to the stories underlying the statistics about this anxious, adaptive, and diverse cohort of teenagers in today's youth ministries.

Method

This interview project, a subset of the Living a Better Story (LABS) project through the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), was built based on reviewing interdisciplinary qualitative research

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https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/23/most-u-s-teens-who-use-cellphones-do-it-to-pass-time-connect-with-others-learn-new-things/.

[9] Among reporting residents, 53% of those under 18 and 61.6% of all US Americans are white and non-Hispanic. U.S. Census Bureau (2021). 2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html.

[10] Candice L. Odgers and Michael B. Robb, *Tweens, Teens, Tech, and Mental Health* (San Francisco: Common Sense Media, 2020), 17; citing statistics from "Immigrant Children," *Child Trends*, 2018, https://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=immigrant-children.

[11] Fifty-two percent of young people ages ten to nineteen: 16 percent below the poverty level and 36 percent in low-income households. United States Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement," 2018, http://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html.

[12] Gary J. Gates, "In U.S., More Adults Identifying as LGBT," Gallup, January 11, 2017, https://news.gallup.com/poll/201731/lgbt-identification-rises.aspx.

[13] Gates, "In U.S., More Adults Identifying as LGBT."

[14] Jody L Herman et. al., "Age of Individuals Who Identify as Transgender in the United States," Williams Institute UCLA School of Law, 2017, 2, https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/TransAgeReport.pdf; and Michelle M. Johns et al., "Transgender Identity and Experiences of Violence Victimization, Substance Use, Suicide Risk, and Sexual Risk Behaviors among High School Students—19 States and Large Urban School Districts, 2017," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 68, no. 3 (2019): 67–71.

methodologies as our research team designed protocols, interviewed participants, and analyzed data. Primary among these methodologies is narrative analysis. Generalizability is not necessarily the aim; rather, narrative analysis provides us with an avenue by which we can highlight and consider the unique stories of young people as they consider answers to their questions of identity, belonging, and purpose.[15]

Research in the sub-discipline of narrative psychology has flourished in the last four decades, particularly in its application to the study of identity. Finding biological ("I am my body") and rational ("I think therefore I am") definitions of identity problematic and reductionistic, narrative psychologists set out to find identity coherence through the "life story." A short-hand definition is given by leading researcher in the field, Dan McAdams:

> [The life story] is not synonymous with a case study; it is not simply any old thing that a person says when asked to talk about the self in a psychological experiment. The life story, instead, is an internalized and evolving structure of the mind – an integrative story about who I am, how I came to be, and where my life may be going.[16]

Modeling our approach in part on this life story approach, our team structured, piloted, and revised an interview protocol drawing also on prior work of several researchers across the disciplines of sociology of religion, psychology, and practical theology, primary among them Nancy Ammerman, Jenny Pak, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, and Almeda Wright,[17] as well as prior FYI research (notably Sticky Faith, Growing Young, and the Multicultural Youth Ministry projects).[18] Of primary concern when constructing protocols was the degree to which each question would advance our understanding of a young person's answers to three questions: Who am I? (Identity), Where do I fit? (Belonging), and What difference can I make? (Purpose), as well as their experiences of church and faith. Three 1.5-2-hour interviews each were conducted with 27 diverse adolescent participants from summer 2019 to summer

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[15] Narrative analysis "focuses on stories" and "examines human lives through the lens of a narrative, honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), 128. Narrative analysis is typically considered a flexible approach that employs various methodologies and analytic strategies See D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 154; Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 32-34, 202-203.

[16] Dan P. McAdams and Erika Manczak, "Personality and the Life Story," *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology, Volume 4: Personality Processes and Individual Differences*, vol. 4, (2015): 425-46, https://doi.org/10.1037/14343-019, 425.

[17] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jenny Pak, *Korean American Women: Stories of Acculturation and Changing Selves* (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2012); Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, "Methodological Design and Procedures for the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR) Personal Interviews," *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,* (2003) https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/assets/102495/personalivmethods.pdf; Almeda Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[18] Project expert advisors included Steven Argue, Scott Cormode, Joi Freeman, Jenny Pak, Montague Williams, and Almeda Wright. Jake Mulder provided overall LABS project leadership and additional protocol construction input.

2020 by a team of ten interviewers representing the ethnocultural and geographic diversity of the sample.[19]

Interview participant demographics included the following:

- *Race/Ethnicity:* 4 African American/Black, 1 Arab American, 6 Asian American, 5 Latino/a, 4 Multiracial/ethnic, 7 White
- *Gender:* 12 female, 14 male, 1 nonbinary
- *Geography:* 2 from the East Coast, 5 from the South, 2 from the Midwest, 18 from the West Coast[20]
- *Socioeconomics:* 8 lower, 9 middle, 6 upper middle, 4 unsure
- *Denomination:* 19 teenagers from 11 different Protestant denominations; 8 from non-denominational churches
- *Community type:* 15 suburban, 10 urban, 2 rural
- *Grade in school:* 2 ninth grade, 3 tenth grade, 7 eleventh grade, 12 twelfth grade, 3 recent graduates[21]

All interviews were transcribed, deidentified, and reviewed by interviewers as well as other team members. Interviewers wrote intermittent reports as well as final reports at the end of each participant sequence. The team met throughout the process to discuss emerging themes and at the conclusion of the majority of the interviews to explore key narratives and overall learnings, followed by ongoing coding of transcript data.

As narratives were being examined, we sought multiple rounds of input from team members and advisors. In addition, twelve focus groups were conducted with 35 teenagers to solicit input and clarification on narrative wording. Groups took place in California, North Carolina, and Michigan. Among these participants, 15 were White, 7 Latino, 8 Asian American, and 3 African American.

Alongside our interviews, a literature review team conducted various rounds of exploration into themes of identity, belonging, purpose, faith formation, Generation Z, and narrative identity utilizing a cross-disciplinary approach and incorporating popular culture sources. Over one hundred academic and popular sources were consulted in this process.[22]

Finally, data analyses from 2,092 youth survey participants in the Sticky Faith Innovation research project were utilized for comparison purposes, drawing from questions specifically asking students to reflect on their identity, belonging, and purpose.[23]

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[19] Interview team included Kat Armas, Macy Davis, Tyler Greenway, Brad Griffin, Jennifer Guerra Aldana, Garrison Hayes, Jane Hong-Guzmán de León, Helen Jun, Andy Jung, and Kara Powell (executive director and principal investigator). Our racial/ethnic backgrounds include African American (1), Latina (2), Asian American (3), and White (4).

[20] Specific state representation included: 18 from California (representing Los Angeles and 5 other cities in LA/Orange County); 2 from Michigan (Grand Rapids area and rural); 4 from North Carolina (4 communities across the state); 1 from Texas (Dallas area); and 2 from Maryland (suburban DC area).

[21] Our sample skewed toward later high school in order to hear from young people who were developmentally more able to reflect on their experiences and identity, belonging, and purpose.

[22] Literature review team was led by Aaron Yenney and included Kat Armas, Roslyn Hernández, Helen Jun, Gabriella Silva, Sam Zheng Ning, and Quanesha Moore.

[23] The Sticky Faith Innovation project explored the development of a cohort-based ministry innovation process with churches from across the country. Tyler Greenway performed Linguistic Inquiry and Word

The narratives described here are not necessarily generalizable among all teenagers in the US context, but they provide insight based on the cross-section of young people we interviewed at this particular moment in time and our broader review of today's adolescent reality.

The process for describing Christ-centered answers emerged from a goal to determine what Christian faith leaders would want a young person to internalize about their identity, belonging, and purpose that is most faithful to the story of God as revealed through the person of Jesus Christ and the scriptures. In other words, to develop a working model to help ministry leaders rethink the goals of discipleship around identity, belonging, and purpose.

After exploring alternative language, reviewing Sticky Faith Innovation participant team narratives, sifting through current narratives, and considering how we might help young people form Christ-centered responses, a suggested framework emerged. These phrases have been refined by theological research and team deliberation, as well as input from advisors, youth ministry practitioners, and the 35 student participants in 12 focus groups mentioned earlier. (Note to readers: It felt important to preserve this segment of the method, but this paper does not detail the theological narratives. Our presentation will introduce them.)

Findings: How today's teenagers are answering their biggest questions

Following are distillations of themes into 3-4 key narratives for each core question. These findings prioritize interview transcript data, incorporating other sources described above. First responses in each list seem to be the most common; others are listed in no particular order.

IDENTITY: Who am I?

Our identity is *our view of ourselves*. All too often teenagers find that being "themselves" feels inches—or sometimes miles—beyond their reach. In part, this is because being yourself is too low of a bar. They want to be their "*best* selves."[24]

Furthermore, "being yourself" is tricky because young people are never the sole source of their identities. The identity of every teenager is partly formed by the collective influence of family members, friends, and other adult authority figures. With that in mind, the following four themes represent this interaction of self-determination and socially-shaped identity.

1. I AM WHAT OTHERS EXPECT – *I am what others want or need me to be. I constantly feel pressure to live up to the expectations of family, teachers, friends, church, and society.*

According to practical theologian Andy Root, "No identity is discovered in a vacuum; we cannot truly find ourselves without finding ourselves with someone."[25] But for teenage identity development, others' influence is hyper-elevated. In fact, this first answer was the most common source of identity in the students we interviewed.

Count analyses on responses from the 2,092 participants—insights that appear periodically alongside our interview analyses.

[24] Kelby Clark, "How Gen Z Is Changing the Face of Modern Beauty," ViacomCBS, March 7, 2019, https://www.viacom.com/news/how-gen-z-is-changing-the-face-of-modern-beauty.

[25] Andrew Root, *The End of Youth Ministry? Why Parents Don't Really Care about Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do about It* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 183.

Imagine every teenager's day like a play performed before a packed audience. The teenager's task: to try to please every audience member. At every moment. It's exhausting to switch from being the family jokester at home to the obedient academic at school to the faith-filled youth group superstar at church.

The majority of teenagers try their best to please one audience at a time. When they are at school, they use the lines and choreography that appease their school friends and teachers. At home, church, and in their neighborhood, they swap scripts.

In our interviews, immigrants and teenagers from diverse ethnic environments often felt amplified pressure to please multiple audiences. We heard descriptions of "code switching," the practice of alternating between different languages or different manners of speech based on audience. Similarly, teenagers from a variety of backgrounds articulated the stress of pleasing voices both inside and outside their church.

2. I AM NOT _____ ENOUGH – *I fill in the blank with whatever I feel most judged about by others or myself: funny, smart, athletic, thin, pretty, accomplished, Black/Latino/Asian …*

Feeling inadequate or "not enough" was mentioned overtly by about three-fourths of the high school students we interviewed. When it wasn't mentioned explicitly, it was a frequent identity subtext.

When it comes to not feeling "enough," immigrant and young people of color often experience additional layers of complexity. We heard stories of colorism—the experience of being judged by skin-tone which happens across racial groups as well as within them.[26] Others felt the sting of ethnic-identity stereotypes based on language and slang use, with family and peer expectations often at odds.

Student by student, the specific adjective differs but the feeling of not measuring up is nearly universal.

3. I AM MY IMAGE – *I curate the identity I want the world to see, through social media and beyond. I'm working on the brand I want to project—my style. Sometimes it's more like a mask I wear.*

A brand is what makes one product, business, or organization different from another, and today brand identity also applies to people. Especially in this era of heavy social media use, many teenagers think about—and feel pressure to work on—their brand.[27] The only extracurricular hobby shared by all students we interviewed was social media. Not everyone we interviewed did their homework every day, but everyone was daily viewing, sharing, and liking.

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[26] Colorism is a form of cultural racism, which "refers to representations, messages and stories conveying the idea that behaviors and values associated with white people or 'whiteness' are automatically 'better' or more 'normal' than those associated with other racially defined groups. . . . Cultural racism is also a powerful force in maintaining systems of internalized supremacy and internalized racism. It does that by influencing collective beliefs about what constitutes appropriate behavior, what is seen as beautiful, and the value placed on various forms of expression." Sally Leiderman, Maggie Potapchuk, and Shakti Butler, Racial Equity Tools, accessed July 16, 2020, http://racialequitytools.org/fundamentals/core-concepts#cultural.

[27] Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 191–94.

While teenagers certainly have cared about image in the past, our social media age affords young people unique access to the technology that allows them to in essence *advertise* themselves. Consequently, marketing expert Sarah Weise concludes that today's young people are "intuitively segmenting and curating personal brands."[28]

Teenagers believe that with the right brand identity, anyone (including them) can become "internet famous." And every moment is a broadcast opportunity. Even when it maybe shouldn't be.

4. I AM MORE THAN MY LABEL – *I'm more than what others say about me, including my mental health or learning style diagnosis, stereotypes about my race or ethnicity, my test scores, or my past trauma.*

Today's teenagers want to be known for more than their label. Especially when—as is the case with broad descriptions about their generation—the label is imposed on them. Gen Z expert Joi Freeman describes this way of interacting with identity using the metaphor of a bouquet. "Whereas recent generations may have seen identity options like various colors of roses in one bouquet, Gen Z tends to look at identity like an assortment of many types of flowers bundled together—a collection of experiences. I can be a banker and an artist. It doesn't have to look congruent. Identity isn't just one thing—all of these pieces make up who I am."[29]

In our study, young people diagnosed with a mental health or physical challenge or as someone who learns differently seemed fairly comfortable talking about their diagnosis. But they also wanted to be viewed as more than someone who struggles with a particular challenge or who receives extra attention in class.

BELONGING: Where do I fit?

Belonging is *our connection with others*. It's how we feel like we fit in with groups of people. We might say we "belong" when we're with those who really know, understand, and accept us for who we are.

Belonging is one of the great spiritual hungers of our day. We are a society marked by loneliness and disconnection. We have so many reasons for telling people they don't belong—because of their personality, neighborhood, income, race, ethnicity, immigration status, or disability. We have friends and followers and fans on social media, but these connections often only remind us who *isn't* following us or where we *don't* belong.

We want to belong so badly that we will go to great lengths—even hiding or changing parts of our identity or pursuing a false sense of purpose—to feel it. For teenagers in particular, "Where do I fit?" usually leads among the 3 big questions. They're desperate to belong. Below are the three dominant themes from our exploration of belonging narratives.

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[28] Sarah Weise, *InstaBrain: The New Rules for Marketing to Generation Z* (Independently Published, 2019), 39.
[29] Joi Freeman, conversation with the author (Brad Griffin), July 16, 2020. Find more of Joi's work on Gen Z at remnantstrategy.com.

1. I FIT WHEN I FEEL SAFE TO BE ME – *I fit wherever I feel comfortable, with people who accept me and don't judge me. When I can be my real self and not fake. I'm included.*

In some ways, safety is part of the very meaning of belonging. It's a basic condition, a prerequisite. Feelings of safety, security, and acceptance are critical to belonging in groups.[30] Students we interviewed used the term *safe* and related synonyms (*secure*, *shelter*, *protect*) over one hundred times to describe various aspects of belonging. They also talked about belonging as where they feel comfortable, with people who feel like family.

This theme underscores the link between identity and belonging. When a young person really belongs, it's not just about fitting in. It's about bringing their "real selves" to the table and not just the version others want to see.

For many of our interview participants, family was a significant source of belonging. For others, family did not feel safe, nor was home a haven for belonging.

2. I FIT IF WE SHARE _____. – *I connect with you when we've shared experiences, we have the same values and priorities, like the same music, have worked together on something, or use similar language.*

Many interview participants talked about belonging with friends because they share so much in common. We frequently heard belonging described as simply *being together*. We also heard a lot about shared experiences that create belonging: running on the same cross-country team, being in a school club, going on a church retreat, or even listening to the same music.

Of course, these very experiences that foster belonging for some can make those who don't share them feel even more left out. It can be helpful to think about these aspects of shared experience like a topography of belonging—a landscape teenagers traverse in search of their fit. Young people constantly navigate multiple groups and relationships simultaneously, whether due to divorce, race, migration, or just the difference between church, family, and school. These can feel like disparate locations on a young person's belonging map.

It's not uncommon for a young person to feel as though they're constantly shifting *who they are* for different audiences because they desperately *want to belong* in each group. But as they move from place to place on the map, they belong in different ways. Montague Williams, an advisor for this project, suggested, "This whole work of belonging is about trying out different versions of 'we.'" Sometimes the "me" changes for each "we." True belonging—being known, understood, and accepted—can feel elusive, like a hidden spot off the grid.

Many teenagers who struggle to find shared experiences with peers in their local community look online for support (as do some of their parents). This is especially true for LGBTQ young people who feel rejected at school, home, or church—or all three. Inclusive virtual environments have been shown to increase these teenagers' sense of belonging.[31]

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[30] D. Anderson-Butcher and D. E. Conroy, "Factorial and Criterion Validity of Scores of a Measure of Belonging in Youth Development Programs," *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 62, no. 5 (2002), 857–76.

[31] Benjamin Hanckel and Alan Morris, "Finding Community and Contesting Heteronormativity: Queer Young People's Engagement in an Australian Online Community," *Journal of Youth Studies* 17, no. 7 (August 2014): 872–86; and Yvette Taylor, Emily Falconer, and Ria Snowdon, "Queer Youth, Facebook

Implicitly or explicitly, US young people of color and Indigenous youth often hear the message that they fit only if they are White. Immigrant and refugee youth may also face barriers to belonging, depending on their familiarity with dominant US culture, English language fluency, and family citizenship status. This is a well-researched phenomenon known as "belonging uncertainty."[32] Belonging uncertainty happens when someone in a particular group questions whether they belong in a social setting such as school, a team, work, or church.

Discrimination affects teenagers in many ways, one of which is a feeling of "I don't really fit here." This uncertainty can negatively impact both academics and health. The good news is that when students are reassured they do belong, they are more protected against negative stereotypes, more likely to earn higher grades, and remain healthier overall.[33]

3. I FIT IF I FEEL LIKE I'M NEEDED – *I belong because I have to help out in some way. Where I'm needed, I don't have to question if I fit in.*

One of the ways researchers talk about belonging is seeing ourselves as integral parts of the systems that surround us—relationships, organizations, and cultural environments.[34] So it's natural for young people to feel like they belong when they know they're needed in some way. Being needed can feel good.

But there's a darker side to fitting where we're needed. Sometimes it can feel like belonging is conditional. It can add pressure and expectations. It can leave teenagers feeling as if they're never free to just "be" in a world that always needs them to "do."

PURPOSE: What difference can I make?

Our purpose is *our contribution to the world*. Like a compass pointing north, purpose provides each of us—at any age—life direction.[35] Despite the value of this orientation, it's estimated that four out of ten Americans have not yet discovered a satisfying life purpose.[36]

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and Faith: Facebook Methodologies and Online Identities," *New Media & Society* 16, no. 7 (November 1, 2014): 1138–53.

[32] Gregory M. Walton and Geoffrey L. Cohen, "A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 1 (2007): 82–96; and Gregory M. Walton and Geoffrey L. Cohen, "A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students," *Science* 331, no. 6023 (2011): 1447–51.

[33] Walton and Cohen, "A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention," 1447.

[34] Bonnie Hagerty et al., "Sense of Belonging: A Vital Mental Health Concept," *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 6, no. 3 (1992): 172–77; and Bonnie Hagerty et al., "An Emerging Theory of Human Relatedness," *Image: The Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 25, no. 4 (1993): 291–96.

[35] "Like a compass that always points north, a purpose in life consistently orients and motivates an individual toward a personally significant aim." Kendall Cotton Bronk, *Purpose in Life: A Critical Component of Optimal Youth Development* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Science & Business Media, 2014), 6. The positive effects of purpose for teenagers and young adults include lower risk of self-destructive behavior and a markedly positive attitude that generates an eagerness to learn about the world. William Damon, *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 31.

[36] Emily Esfahani Smith, *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 24.

Our understanding of our purpose evolves over our lifetime, with adolescence and young adulthood often being seasons of escalating clarity. Sometimes that clarity comes from resolving the tension of seeing unlimited roads to the future while simultaneously feeling pressured to follow specific lanes prescribed to help one "get into a good college" or "find the right job." Other times increased certainty comes as young people finally figure out what they are good at, after years of knowing only what they aren't.

Regardless of age or the degree of clarity, purpose unites two (sometimes divergent) interests—what's worthwhile *to us* as well as what's consequential for the world *around us*.[37] Put simply, purpose is meaningful both for us and beyond us.[38] Below are four primary themes from our research about teenagers' pursuit of purpose.

1. I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE WHEN I'M HELPING OTHERS – *I matter when I'm caring for others, making them feel good and happy, being a hero; when someone is depending on me.*

Across our discussions about identity, belonging, and purpose, youth group students felt a universal impulse to help others. Every single teenager we met with talked about "helping" at least once during our three interviews with them. Overall, participants named service and helping others more than any other path to purpose.

Race-focused activism sparked energy among many students in our study. One high school senior was planning to develop workshops for his diverse youth group on racial reconciliation. Another student serves as a leader in her school's Black Student Union. In that role, she spearheaded a campaign on African American mental health struggles.

Young people who channel their resources and skills to benefit others tend to have higher rates of happiness and well-being.[39] Yet while most teenagers who described helping others responded feeling good as a result, our estimate is that about one-third of those same young people were potentially serving so much that their own health suffered.

2. I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IF I FOLLOW THE SCRIPT– *I've been given clear roles and lines and I follow them. I know the right things to do (mostly things my family or church say). I do what I'm supposed to do.*

While not as frequent as "helping others," a second theme related to purpose was following the roles and lines handed down by others. Given all the possible routes ahead of them, our interviewees seemed fine, and often almost eager, to be assigned a lane by the explicit or implicit "rules" of their friends, family, or faith community. Despite interviewees' desire to express some individuality, in a world of endless options, they appreciated ready-made highways.

While scripts related to academic pressures cut across ethnicity and backgrounds, students from families that more recently immigrated often feel heightened pressure because of sacrifices made to move to the US. In some homes, the family script also mandates taking care of younger siblings.

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[37] See William Damon, *Noble Purpose: The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003).

[38] Bronk, *Purpose in Life*, 7.

[39] Martin E. P. Seligman et al., "Positive Education: Positive Psychology and Classroom Interventions," *Oxford Review of Education* 35, no. 3 (2009): 301.

Predictably, given that every teenager we interviewed was nominated by a youth pastor or church leader, their scripts include assumptions about faith and faith community. Multiple students described their faith transitioning from an external script imposed by others to an internal script they were drafting themselves. Teenagers' efforts to discover God's plan for their future seem to generate both peace and pressure—the latter often a result of youth leaders' well-meaning teaching about knowing "God's will for your life." This pressure to have a clear sense of their future, whether connected or not with God's plan for them, was mentioned by one-third of the students we interviewed and by most seniors.

3. I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE WHEN I GET TO MAKE CHOICES ABOUT MY LIFE – *I want to feel like I have agency and power to choose at least some of what happens in my life.*

While the young people we interviewed seemed unresentful about the scripts handed to them, their third path to purpose came from sensing they could choose (at least some of) what happens in their lives. They wanted, and appreciated, having a sense of agency—the opportunity to develop their own interests, goals, and values.[40] Today's teenagers want to make their own decisions. And they hope those decisions will shape our world.[41]

The young people we interviewed took pride not just in choosing their own worthwhile work but also in the tangible signs of trust and respect bestowed on them by adults, in particular when adults at church give them opportunities to take responsibility and support to serve in some way.

4. I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE WHEN I'M HEADED TOWARD A GOOD FUTURE – *I'm building a good future for me and others I care about. I'm achieving, excelling, and moving toward what I define as "the good life." I'm being my best self.*

The future of our world is bleak, but my future is bright. That's the essence of the "optimism gap" documented by student researcher Sophia Pink after driving across the US interviewing twenty-one-year-olds. They used words such as "scary," "destruction," and "dumpster fire" to describe what's forthcoming for America. But when the same young people imagine their own futures, responses ranged from "hopeful" to "determined" and "loving."[42] In FYI's analysis of 2,092 young people, we also saw a bias toward describing their own lives and futures positively.

This self-optimism aligns with the fourth current answer that emerged from our interview questions about purpose. While the exact target was murky and varied with each teenager, the majority of these youth group participants were aiming toward their conception of "the good life."

For many of the students we interviewed, that target includes three overlapping circles: faith, financial success, and fulfillment. While most students viewed their best future as a brew of financial prosperity and personal fulfillment, a handful distilled theirs to personal relationships and faith.

Notably, the research of Yale scholar Almeda Wright (an advisor for this project) highlights how visions of the future can differ across racial demographics. She notes, "Death, violence,

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[40] This definition of agency is adapted from Kara Powell and Steven Argue, *Growing With: Every Parent's Guide to Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Thrive in Their Faith, Family, and Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 136.

[41] Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace, *Generation Z: A Century in the Making* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 32–33.

[42] Sophia Pink, "I Drove across America to Find Out What Makes Gen Z Tick," *Pacific Standard*, April 8, 2019, https://psmag.com/ideas/road-tripping-to-understand-gen-z.

oppression, and racism have become part of the narratives of all young African Americans, whether they are experiencing these firsthand or just reading about them on social media. … For some youth, there is not a longing for a brighter future; rather, they simply wonder if they will get a chance to grow up and if they will be alive.[43]

Implications for youth ministry educators

Based on this research, here we offer a few possible implications for youth ministry educators:

1. The importance of equipping future leaders for empathy

In our previous research studying churches that are "growing young," or effectively engaging young people,[44] we identified empathy as one of six core commitments these churches shared, specifically empathy across generations.

We defined empathy in *Growing Young* as "*feeling with* young people . . . sitting on the curb of a young person's life, celebrating their dreams and grieving over their despair."[45] Since that time, countless adults have asked us for more help with understanding empathy and putting it into practice. So we added to our original description: we practice empathy when we *notice* and *care*. Noticing is reading someone else's emotions. Caring is responding to those emotions with feelings of our own.[46]

Taking another's perspective increases our ability to understand them and helps us avoid judgment and stereotypes. It humanizes them as we see reality through their eyes—if only for the moment—rather than othering them and holding them at a distance. It steps into their shoes for a few paces on the road. Empathy increases our drive to help others rather than ignore their pain.

We suspect many students come into our youth ministry classrooms and training environments with an empathy gap. If we are to equip them for ministry that transforms young people through encountering Christ in loving community, we must equip them to practice empathy and foster it among adults and students alike.

2. The power of storytelling in identity coconstruction

Psychologists tell us that engaged listening helps teenagers make sense of their stories. This is because stories we tell about ourselves are products of both the speaker *and* the listener, a process known as "coconstruction." Engaged listening includes being attentive, supportive, and

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[43] Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 198.
[44] Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016). See fulleryouthinstitute.org/growingyoung for details and resources.
[45] Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 91–92.
[46] This definition and the following insights are derived largely from M. H. Davis, *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

challenging, and offering interpretation.[47] As we listen empathetically and give feedback, we help young people become narrators of their identity, belonging, and purpose journeys.[48]

Teaching emerging youth ministry leaders to be good storytellers as well as good story-listeners is essential for preparing them to accompany young people well in this process. This also positions leaders for the interpretive work described in point 4 below of helping adolescents discover theologically-rich answers to their biggest questions.

3. Helping youth ministers continue their own search for identity, belonging, and purpose

Close proximity to teenagers can remind adults of our own quests for identity, belonging, and purpose—sometimes too much. Adults need to do this work too, in particular undergraduates who may still be emerging adults themselves, or seminary students navigating a midlife career change.

Sometimes adults struggle to really accompany teenagers well because they have unresolved questions and toxic stories they are telling themselves. When they try to connect with a teenager, they find themselves wondering, *Will they like me? Will they listen to me? Will I really make a difference?* Guiding our students to do their own work on identity, belonging, and purpose can open them up to empathize with and lead young people on a whole new level.

4. The importance of theological training to help leaders walk with students through their biggest developmental questions toward theologically-informed responses

Teenagers often wonder, *How is God relevant to me?* In one poignant example, we heard from a student who reflected that faith was "a big part of my life, but it's not my whole life, I guess." In our experience, many young people are a lot like that student. Faith is in the picture, but it's not integrated. And all too often, it feels like a compartmentalized extra more than a life essential.

Empathizing with today's teenagers is the first step to helping them answer their big questions of identity, belonging, and purpose. The next step is to ask, if these are the biggest questions, what does the good news of Jesus Christ say in response? This is a move toward the interpretive and prophetic. As educators, we must equip our students for this practical theological work of ministry.

Young people need new plotlines, new mantras to say to themselves over and over about who they are, where they fit, and what difference they can make. New Christ-centered stories can replace teenagers' incomplete or toxic narratives, empowering them to live out more freeing answers to their most pressing questions. We believe this is the heart of discipleship—the heart of spiritual formation—and so it is essential to youth ministry.

5. Reimagining youth ministry through the lens of identity, belonging and purpose

Finally, we propose a fresh look at youth ministry practices, programs, and teaching through the lens of the 3 big questions of identity, belonging, and purpose. While ministry should not be limited to these considerations, youth ministry leaders will benefit from asking: Is what we're

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[47] Laura Ferrer-Wreder and Jane Kroger, "Identity as Life Story: Narrative Understandings of Adolescent Identity Development," in *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance between Self and Other* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 112.
[48] Monisha Pasupathi, "The Social Construction of the Personal Past and Its Implications for Adult Development," *Psychological Bulletin* 127, no. 5 (2001): 651–72.

currently doing in ministry helping young people answer their key questions? Are we more focused on one or two of the questions to the neglect of others? Do our volunteers know how to listen for and walk with students through these questions? What practices, programs, or teaching might reinforce or create space for identity, belonging, and/or purpose exploration?

Note: Portions of this paper were adapted with permission from Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021).