

7 Conversations

**your church needs to have
about young adults**

A tool for leaders to help
churches engage and
reach 20s and 30s.

evangelical alliance
together making Jesus known



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Evangelical Alliance

The Evangelical Alliance joins together hundreds of organisations, thousands of churches and tens of thousands of individuals to make Jesus known.

Representing our members since 1846, the Evangelical Alliance is the oldest and largest evangelical unity movement in the UK. United in mission and voice, we exist to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society.

Highlighting the significant opportunities and challenges facing the church today, we are committed to sharing fresh ideas, celebrating best practice and catalysing innovation throughout the evangelical community and beyond.

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An introduction

Why this? Why now?

These are extraordinary times of change for us as a society. The Evangelical Alliance is about working together to make Jesus known. We have created 7 Conversations because we believe God is doing something exciting in His church; we want to tell that story and encourage all of us to take the next step on the journey. 7 Conversations is an invitation to discuss the cultural trends of a

generation, reflect on what we do and make decisions that will increase the fruitfulness of our ministry.

It is based on several years of research and extensive interviews with hundreds of church and organisation leaders, young adults and academics. We hope that it enables every church, regardless of size or setting, to grow in understanding, numbers and depth in this area.



Framing the issue

An urgent conversation

The Evangelical Alliance published *A Missing Generation* in 2009. This missing generation was so called because of the diminishing numbers of those aged between 18 and 30 attending our churches. Twelve years on, despite some significant encouragements – for example, the numbers of young adults engaged in online church during coronavirus – the problem remains, with young adults noticeably absent from many churches. For the sake of the gospel, we want to see a radical shift in numbers of younger generations choosing to follow Jesus and be a part of the church.

Young adults have also been much maligned by older generations in society. In recent years, they have been the subject of bruising critique from authors, social commentators and viral YouTube videos.¹ Millennials (those born between 1982 and 2000²) and Gen Z (those born between 2000 and 2018) have been badged

‘Generation Me’, ‘the look down generation’ and ‘snowflakes’ as critics perceive their self-obsessed, emotionally fragile state. For the sake of unity, we are passionate about a church united across generational divides and the church telling a better story of intergenerational togetherness.

Within the church there are concerns about how well we are discipling younger generations. A significant piece of research carried out in 2019 found that of those 18-35 year olds who identified as Christians, currently or formerly, over half did not go to church and just four per cent showed characteristics that met their criteria of ‘resilient disciples’. The UK figure was also lagging significantly behind figures in other countries in the survey. For the sake of the church, we are desperate to see disciples made who are wholehearted followers of Jesus and active in the transformation of society.

¹ See, for example, Simon Sinek on Millennials in the Workplace: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hER0Qp6QJNU&t=599s

² Strauss, W. & Howe, N. (1991). *Generations*. William Morrow & Co



A hopeful conversation

Both the challenges and the opportunities have arisen because of rapid cultural change that, whilst affecting all generations, has had a particularly influential impact on this age group. This change represents a challenge because it has implications for our posture and our activities as church. It is an opportunity because, if we innovate and adapt well, we have the chance to be significantly more effective at reaching and keeping the so-called 'missing generation'.

There are good reasons to be hopeful:

- Whilst many in this generation do not attend church or only nominally identify as religious, they are far more open to talking about and engaging with faith than we might think.
- This age group tends not to go to church out of a sense of duty,
- tradition or national identity. The young adults we have in our churches are there because they want to be there. They have opted in and are going against the grain of the prevailing cultural norms to be part of something.
- Those in their 20s and 30s are creative, connected and crave a sense of mission and purpose. Where they feel that they belong and are empowered in the mission of the church, they represent a significant and powerful resource to help the church thrive and grow.
- Many churches are seeing significant growth amongst younger generations. The gospel still works, and if we can respond well to the changes in our world, every church can have a thriving family full of all ages.

What is 7 Conversations?

As we have researched this issue there have been several themes that have repeatedly emerged. This resource is based on those themes and issues that are being most talked about and wrestled with by the hundreds of church leaders and young adults we have spoken to.

7 Conversations will do three things:

1. Identify the key cultural characteristics of young adults, present relevant research, and explore the implications for church and mission for each.
2. Tell stories of churches modelling innovative and effective practice in each area, alongside quotes from young adults themselves that will inspire ideas in this area.
3. Ask questions that arise around these themes which will enable us to learn from them and make strategic and Spirit-led decisions to move us forward.

We hope this resource will encourage you to have a conversation around each of these themes and believe that even small change in each could have a significant impact on our effectiveness as a church amongst 20s and 30s.

Two key principles to bear in mind:

1. This is the connected generation. Ideas and influence spread across this age group virally and quickly. They have more connections than any other age group in history, and share ideas and stories freely and enthusiastically. Church growth and evangelism amongst young adults happens through relationship and invitation.
2. We can create environments into which Christian young adults feel comfortable and excited about inviting their friends. Younger generations will want to know whether they can belong and feel at home in a church family before they commit to believing and following Jesus.



7 Conversations is about how we harness the power of connectedness amongst young adults and create the spaces where disciples are made.

Alongside this booklet there are series of short films to frame each conversation as well as a collection of blogs that delve deeper into the subject matter.

eauk.org/7-conversations



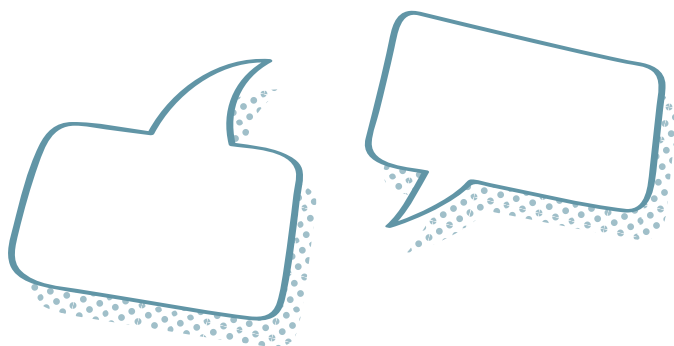
How to use this resource

This is a resource for leaders. It has been designed so that leadership teams, elders, PCCs and others within church leadership can sit down and work through the conversations one at a time. You may choose to use it as part of your usual meeting structure or set aside an awayday or a specific moment. It is possible to have all seven conversations in one sitting, or they could be spread out over a number of weeks. A few further considerations:

- Decide who you want in the room. As well as your leadership team, it may be worth considering a few key young adults whose perspectives might be valuable. Any decision makers in the relevant areas of church life should be there. The group shouldn't be so big that every voice is not heard, but you

do want a range of voices and perspectives.

- Before sitting down to have the conversations, it is recommended that each participant read the resource and/or watch the supplementary films available on the Evangelical Alliance website (eauk.org) to get a grasp of the issues.
- Leave the conversations with a plan. There may be some practical decisions that can be made quickly and can be actioned immediately; some may require further reflection, discussion or the setting up of a smaller working group. Whatever the result of the conversations, be prepared to make the necessary changes, and be prepared to innovate and try some different approaches.



Limitations and assumptions

- These conversations deal largely with practical considerations and the cultures and practices of our churches. Above all things, in these conversations, we need to pray, listen to the Spirit's leading and depend on a move of God in our churches. Mission is a partnership of the human and the divine. These seven conversations are to help us do all we can with what has been entrusted to us by God.
- There are always limitations when analysing generational characteristics. Generational theory is based on the premise that the common events that occur in the childhood or adolescent years of a generation impact how that generation behaves and the culture it creates.³ Clearly, this does not mean that every individual is affected in the same way, and there will be many other factors that influence someone's worldview. What we have endeavoured to do is paint the generational characteristics in broad brush strokes based on the available research and conversations with UK church leaders and young adults themselves. What is presented in this resource should be weighed and used to enhance your local picture as you ask how to be more effective in your local setting.
- The vision of this resource is not mono-generational church but intergenerational church.⁴ Whilst having some groups made up of exclusively young adults may be part of the solution in your context, the end goal must be a church that is fruitful amongst and reflective of all ages. One of the distinctive features of so many churches is the rich diversity in all ages, backgrounds and peoples coming together. It is our hope that 7 Conversations does not cause you to create a new young adult congregation, but rather helps you to flavour and enhance all that the church does, enabling all generations to grow together.

³ Strauss, W. & Howe, N. (1991). *Generations*. William Morrow & Co.

⁴ See Gardner, J. (2008). *Mend the Gap*. IVP for a detailed study of the need for the church to reconcile rather than exacerbate the fractures between generations.

Home

The overarching narrative for the seven conversations

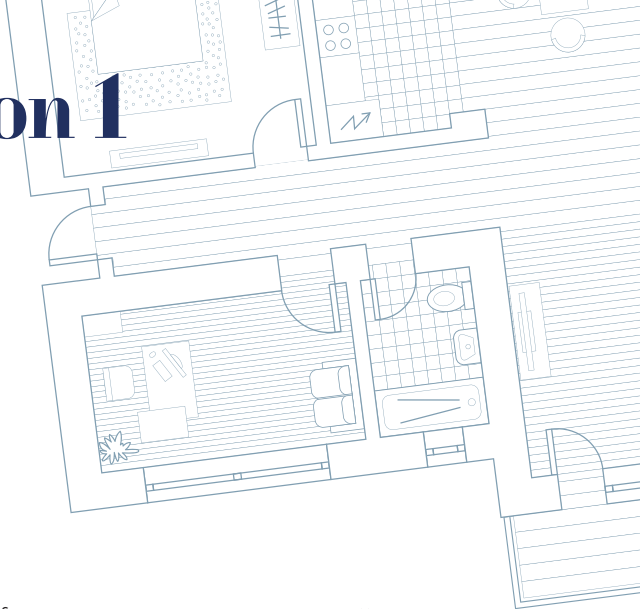
The narrative of 'home' connects with many young adults. Most have left home, created a new home and/or struggled with a sense of where home is during what can be a transient life stage. One of the compelling offers of the gospel and the church is that it calls people to

come home. As church, we aspire to create an environment where people belong, feel at home and are invited to find their spiritual home with God. Using this notion, each of the seven conversations is framed around a room in a house to help set the scene for each dialogue.



Conversation 1

The hallway: Welcome home



The young adult years are punctuated with life-defining decisions and frequent moments of change. In these formative years, careers begin, families are left behind, relationships start, dwellings change, education ends, and knots are tied. Throughout this transitory life stage many young adults will also be searching for a church. How we welcome these 20s and 30s from their first point of contact with our church really matters and could make the difference between them attending once or belonging for decades.

This first conversation about your church is about the hallway of your home.

The moment that someone opens their front door to you is an incredibly important one, especially for the first

time. We all know the difference between how it feels to walk into a space as a guest and know that we are welcome and how it feels to be excluded and that you do not belong. Churches that have effective and growing ministries amongst this age group have a world-class welcome. They work hard at first impressions and making people feel at home.

But the welcome does not always start at the front door. It does not even start with the shape and appearance of the building. It starts online. The online presence of a church is its new foyer.⁵ Most people, especially those of younger generations, will not go anywhere new without first investigating online what it will be like.

⁵ Carey Nieuwhof coins the phrase 'The foyer moved' in this article. <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-reasons-charismatic-churches-are-growing-and-attractional-churches-are-past-peak/>

Making sure our online presence tells our story well and invites people to take the next step into community is critically important.

Furthermore, viewing good online content from churches has been part of the story of many young adults exploring faith, long before they stepped into any church buildings. An increasingly common theme in 20s and 30s hearing the gospel is stumbling across talks and evangelistic social media posts, as the two quotes from church leaders below demonstrate:

“This guy came to our church. He had been following us and checking us out on Twitter for two years before he had the courage to come through the door.”

– Si Watkinson, St Phillips Chapel St

“A girl recently became a Christian at our church. She started her journey by following us on Instagram.”

– Marjorie Allan, The Well Sheffield

These stories are currently rare examples but will be increasingly well-trodden paths to faith in the years to come; they are indicative of young adults’ default posture to get information online.

So how is your welcome? From the first point of contact with you as a church, whether that is a glance at your website, a handshake at the door or the ‘like’ of an Instagram post, how are you inviting people to the next step of belonging? Take some time to reflect on these questions as a leadership team. Invite young adults to contribute to the conversation.

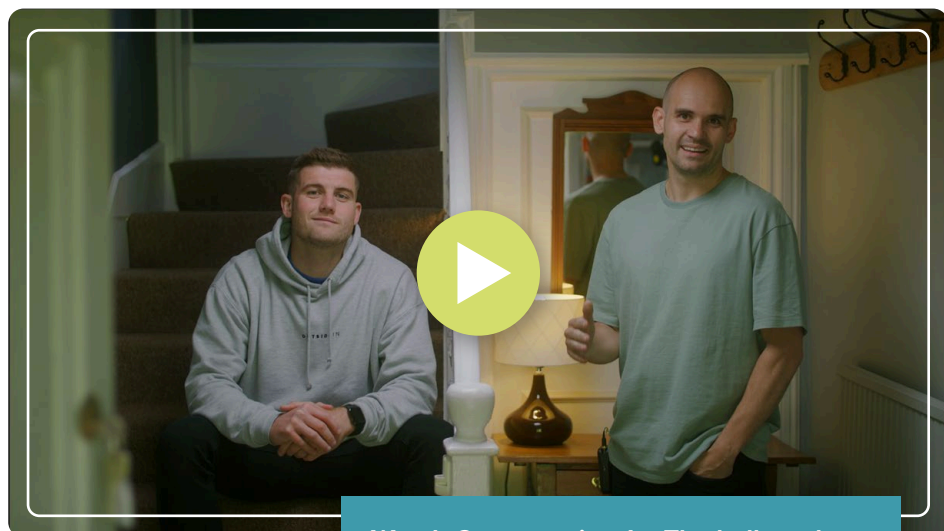
Questions to consider:

- How do we make people feel at home from the moment they walk through our door?
- How do people find your church online? What do they see when they find it?
- Who is your website for? To those just looking, how does your website communicate the reasons that people belong to your church family?
- Is there a considered journey from initial point of contact to belonging to the community?
- How can we create a culture of welcome and nurture so that everyone in our churches prioritises making people feel at home?

Case study




Destiny Church in Edinburgh is one church that meets in four locations. Dan Everett is the student and young adults' worker at the church. Dan and his team are passionate about reaching and engaging more young adults across the city. They began thinking about the church's first interactions and what they can do to reach out to more young adults. They began running workshops where each month they take time to unpack something practical from an expert in a subject. Topics focus on teaching important life skills and range from managing budgeting to mental health. This means they are a great opportunity for other young adults to invite friends to have first contact with the church in a relaxed environment that is accessible to those who are not yet Christians.





Watch Conversation 1 – The hallway here

Take it further:

-  [Getting started with social media](#)
-  [What we've learnt about welcoming young adults](#)
-  [Lessons from the gym: how to welcome young adults](#)





Conversation 2

The living room: Think small

One of the positive aspects of the digital revolution in general and with social media in particular is its capacity to create and maintain relationships, especially allowing us to keep contact with others over vast distances. Younger generations are the most connected in history. But quantity of connection does not necessarily equal quality of connection.⁶ Whilst having the potential for unlimited connection, many young adults find themselves isolated and lonely.⁷ Many in this age group are hungry for deep relationship with others but are struggling to find it.

We are created for relationship. Jesus said the defining feature of His followers would be the way they loved one another. As Christ-centred communities, helping people connect and belong to a family should be core business to us.

This conversation is about our living room. It is about how we facilitate life-giving connections between those in our churches.

Most homes have a space where friends and family sit, laugh, relax, forge friendship and learn to be comfortable in one another's presence. Considering these spaces and asking how these relationships are formed is important. Alpha course founder Nicky Gumbel says, "People will come to church for

⁶ A study conducted pre and post social media found that our number of close friends was falling - Matthew E. Brashears, Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin. 'Social Isolation in America,' American Sociological Review: Vol. 71 (June 2006): 353-375

⁷ The Office for National Statistics: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10

many reasons, but they will stay for only one – friendship.”

As a church we give a lot of thought and energy to our Sunday gathering(s), and these are important. But whilst these meetings are great for bringing together the whole church family for celebration and common teaching, they are not best placed to help people form meaningful friendships. Churches that integrate, disciple and connect people well give thought and investment to creating spaces for authentic relationship to thrive. Living rooms are the spaces in our homes where we sit and talk, relax and feel comfortable in the presence of others. Disciples are made in circles as well as rows.

Smaller spaces can provide a significant place for two types of relationship to thrive: first, an opportunity for young adults to connect with other young adults; second, a chance for them to engage and enter meaningful friendship with older generations. Both are important. We cannot force people to become friends, but we can create the right environments, structures and culture where connection is encouraged and opportunity is given for people to create strong relational bonds.

Questions to consider:

- How much time, effort and strategic thought goes into the structures and culture of small groups or other more intimate expressions of church meeting?
- How significant are these gatherings seen in the life of your church? How is this communicated?
- How intentional are you about helping people engage with smaller gatherings from their first point of contact with you? How quickly do they transition from larger gatherings to smaller ones? What strategies do you have in place to make this happen?
- How do you celebrate intergenerational connection? How could you facilitate these relationships more, especially in a small-group setting?

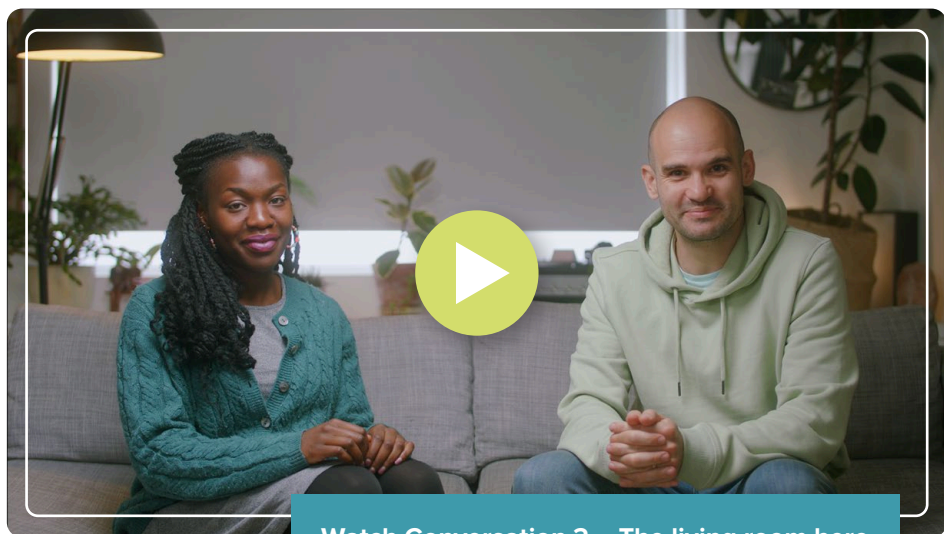
Case study

When looking at small group models that work for 20s and 30s, Pete

Everitt from Yardley Baptist Church reshaped the structure of their groups to focus on food and prayer. This way, the emphasis is on building community around a meal and then investing in time for praying with and for one another. This more casual format has worked well for young adults looking for depth of relationship rather than a focus on content.

Similarly, Mike Nicholls describes how he runs his young adult small groups at Luton Christian Fellowship with “low control, high accountability”, allowing leaders to play around with format to find what works best for their group. Whilst the Sundays follow set content week on week, the groups are empowered not only to decide on their own content, but also how much content is included each week, meaning that, if needed, more time can be made available to form relationships.





Watch Conversation 2 – The living room here

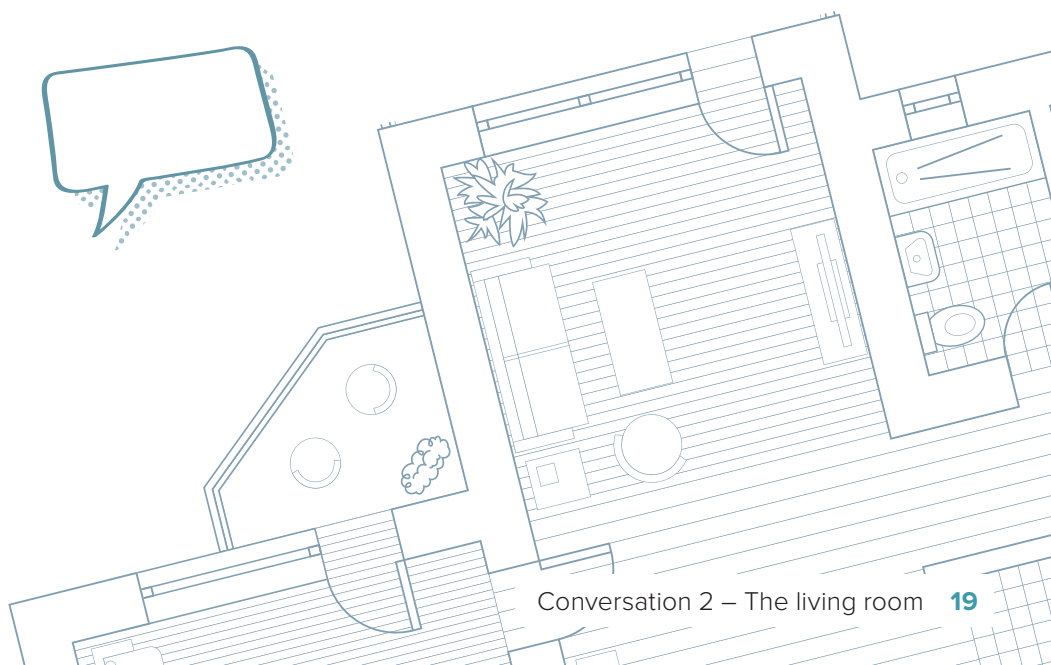
Take it further:



[Safe space is important, but brave space transforms us](#)



[Rethinking small groups](#)



Conversation 3

The study: Leadership

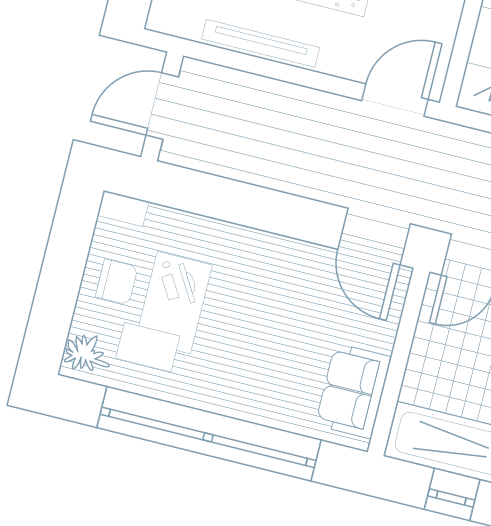
An [important 2018 study](#) asked almost 500 young adults what they observed in the most effective leaders. The three most popular answers were integrity, humility and passion. For many, these may seem surprising. Other attributes such as strategic, visionary and even intelligence were much further down the list. These findings mean we need to consider the style of leadership that this generation will follow and the posture that is needed to be effective in an ever-changing landscape.

This conversation is about leadership and it takes place in the study, the most grown-up room in the house.

The amount that could be said in general on leadership is illustrated by the multitude of books that are written and conferences run on the topic every year. But a specific conversation is needed about how we lead young adults in particular, and we may find that the postures we adopt here help us lead all generations. As we address

the findings cited above and explore how we lead 20s and 30s, here are four themes to bear in mind and explore in this conversation:

1. **Example.** For younger generations, institutions are not viewed in the same way that they once were. There has been an erosion of trust in authority and an abundance of knowledge is now available; with Google at everyone's thumb tips, we can all feel like experts. This means, more than ever, that a leader is not guaranteed authority and influence due to their position of leadership. Leaders who are respected and trusted by this generation set an example and earn their position.
2. **Accessibility.** The high value that young adults place on integrity and authenticity means they want to, even need to, see that their leaders



are ‘walking the walk’. This means that they will at times want to draw close in relationship to their leaders to get to know them and see if this is the case. Leaders gain trust in this area by being as transparent as possible and creating space and opportunity for young adults to see their lives up close.

3. **Collaboration.** For this generation, leadership is a team game, not an individual pursuit. Young adults are often part of networks and place high value on working collaboratively.⁸ Church leadership teams that are thriving in this area listen well to young adults and make decisions with them, not for them.
4. **Purposeful.** Young adults crave purpose and look for meaning in life, work and community.⁹ Leaders of churches that connect with this age group will cast a vision of the church and its impact on individuals and communities, and critically, how they can play a part.

⁸ Barna’s Gen Z Research described the place high value younger generations place on seeing themselves as special and the importance of succeeding as a team.

www.barna.com/who-is-gen-z

⁹ Forge Leadership’s 2018 study found having a sense of purpose was more important than excellent relationships, work life balance, stability and financial reward for millennials at work.

www.millennial-leader.com/research/culture

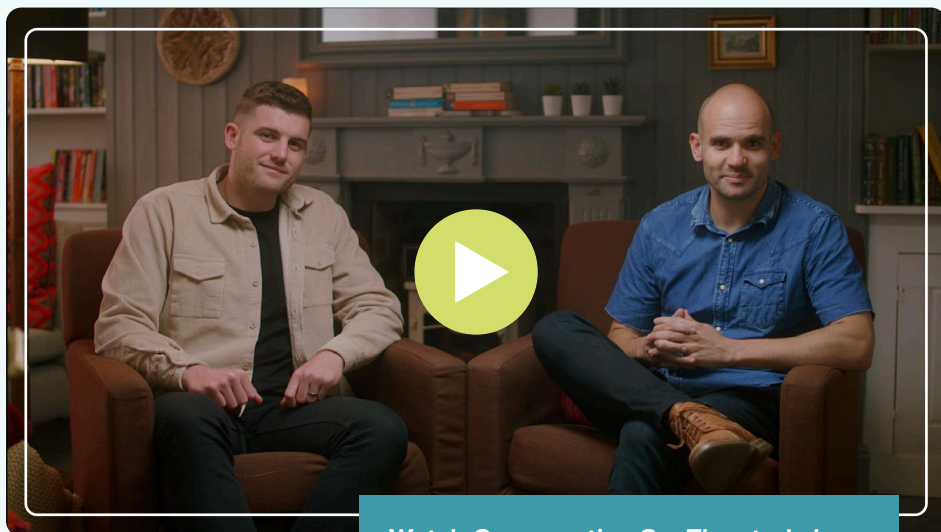
Most change is uncomfortable and probably none more so than in this area. Most of us have developed a way of leading over time and adjusting it to the needs of younger generations will require humility and agility. But asking these questions and reflecting on how we lead and who leads with us will be important as we develop ministry in this area.

Questions to consider:

- What kind of leaders are needed to reach and disciple young adults in today’s church? As you talk to the young adults in your church family, what do they say about what they appreciate most in a leader?
- How participative and team oriented is your church’s leadership, and are young adults involved and listened to?
- How accessible and transparent are leadership decisions and relationships? What does young-adult mentorship look like in a church-leadership setting?



Case study

Custom House Baptist Church is situated in East London and has a thriving community of young adults. One of the first things that comes across when you speak to the lead pastor, Rev Tade Agbesanwa, is his heart to empower younger generations and equip them for leadership, not just in the church, but in every sphere of influence in which they find themselves. He is intentional about keeping in touch with students while they are at university, and when they return he has a position of responsibility lined up for them. The church runs 'Conversations with Pastor Tade', where he interviews CEOs and business people, asking questions like, "How do you make a difference in a hostile workplace?" These have been instrumental in serving the younger adults and helping them feel at home as they make their way in their working life.



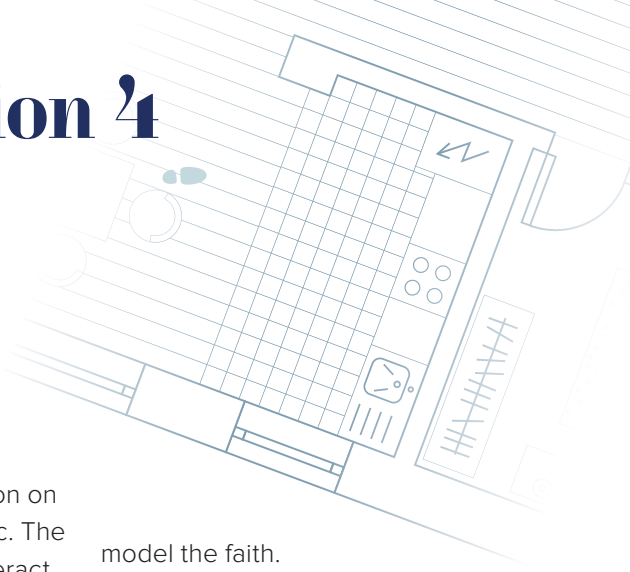
Watch Conversation 3 – The study here

Take it further:

-  [Three must-reads for leaders of young adults and young adult leaders](#)
-  [Investing in young adult leaders for the public square](#)

Conversation 4

The kitchen: Teaching



The effects of the digital revolution on this age group have been seismic. The ways in which we access and interact with information have been amongst the most significantly affected. As the church seeks to communicate the transformative message of Jesus with young adults, it must ask how best to do this against a backdrop of rapid change. We should consider both the way in which information is communicated and the vehicle through which it is delivered.

This conversation takes place in the kitchen. What food are you serving to nourish and help grow strong disciples? How is teaching prepared and delivered? What are the essential ingredients?

Let us begin by considering the impact of the digital shift on how we teach and

model the faith.

The way that we access information through the internet activates the part of our brain wired for story, image, metaphor and creativity.¹⁰ This means that narrative is key in engaging this generation; it is the wallpaper of their lives. Music videos, advertisements, sporting events, social media streams and more all attempt to tap into this powerful means of connecting. With this in mind, it is encouraging to consider that we are seeking to communicate the gospel, the most compelling story the world has ever known. Storytelling should be considered central to how we share with young adults the key truths of the Bible, the story of who you are as a church and your church's mission in its community.¹¹

¹⁰ Siegel, D. (2013). *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, Penguin.

¹¹ Carmine Gallo gives an excellent overview of the power of storytelling and its importance in a digital age: Gallo, C. (2016). *The Storyteller's Secret: From TED Speakers to Business Legends, Why Some Ideas Catch on and Others Don't*. St Martin's Press.

The more creative we are in our communication style, the more memorable and engaging we are likely to be. That is not to say that we abandon logic and proclaim the bold propositional truth statements of the Bible. Young adults need and want both. In this respect, Jesus is an excellent role model. He would frequently declare bold truths, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” and engage in logical, analytical debate. But He was also a brilliant storyteller: “A man was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho... There was a man who had two sons.” Preaching to young adults must appeal to the logical, analytical left brain and the creative, story-

hungry right brain. We must be more Christ-like in our communication.

In addition to what we communicate in our main meetings, the fact that young adults live in a state of constant connection to information means that we should consider how we, as the church, can at least direct them to quality content throughout the week. The Sunday sermon, if our main discipleship tool, in isolation, has been referred to as doing “dial-up ministry in a wifi world”.¹² There is a wealth of online talks, podcasts and resources that can fuel a life of discipleship. We must consider how we act as curators and signposts to this content and explore how we might create our own.

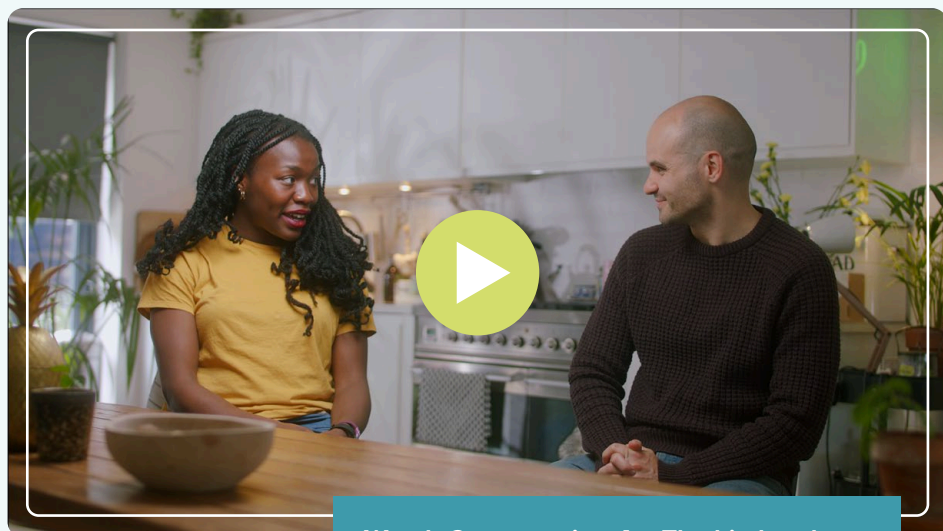
Questions to consider:

- What are the implications for preaching to this generation? Does anything need to change with our communication style as we teach young adults the Bible?
- As well as preaching, what are the other forms our communication takes? Eg notices, electronic communication, invitations. How could these be improved?
- How left-brained (logical, analytical, propositional) or right-brained (creative, narrative, image-rich) is our communication? Do we allow for different learning styles to access our messages?
- How are we using new technologies to communicate? How can we maximise their impact?

¹² Kinnaman, (2019) Faith for Exiles

Case study

New Covenant Church Equipping People began as a church plant in 2015. It has grown rapidly, with more than half of the church aged between 25 and 35. At its heart is a desire to empower young adults in leadership and provide a number of different ways to engage people in the community it serves. The leader, Pastor Akinola Abiona, has also given a great deal of thought to how he teaches his church. Drawing on his teaching background, he explains that many of his church members in this generation are visual learners, so he works hard to provide images and pictures that will make his teaching memorable. He has also worked hard on his storytelling to connect better in his sermons and frequently uses the Passion Translation of the Bible. His team have developed a strong social media presence on Instagram and stream all their services via YouTube.



Watch Conversation 4 – The kitchen here

Take it further:



[Communicating the Bible with young adults](#)



[Laying the foundations: young adults and biblical literacy](#)

Conversation 5

The dining room: Difficult conversations

If the conversation that we have in the kitchen is about style of teaching, this one is about substance.

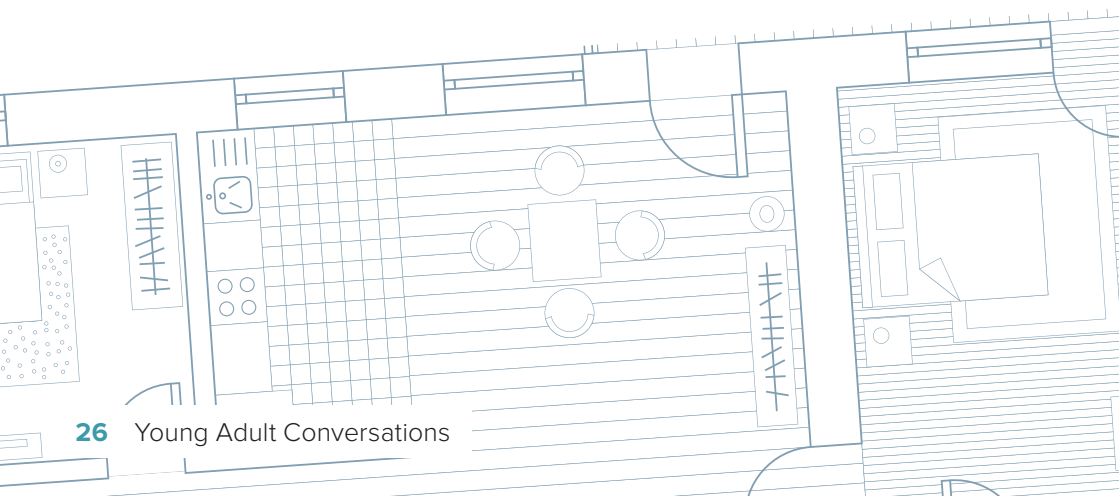
This is a conversation about difficult conversations, and it takes place in the dining room. Families talk about life and discuss the big issues around the table.

A number of different conversations need to take place here.

Firstly, the worldview of an evangelical Christian young adult is increasingly out of step with the prevailing worldview of society. As the church, we must continue to be faithful to the teaching of the Bible, but also equip

20s and 30s to handle the difficult conversations they will face with non-Christian friends.

Secondly, we should consider the issues that we talk about and ensure that those that are relevant to young adults are addressed. Marjorie and Nick Allen, leaders of The Well Sheffield, put it like this: “It is imperative that churches publicly address the issues that matter to Generations Y and Z. We should scratch where they itch. What do they care about? What are they afraid of or just plain confused about?” These issues need to be talked about and grappled with.



Thirdly, it is also worth noting the setting for these issues is the table, a space for dialogue, not a one-way information stream. That is not to say that biblical truth is changed to suit the audience, but it is to say that in engaging with difficult issues it is important to create environments where young adults feel comfortable expressing their opinions and can engage in discussion about them.

To get us started here are three issues that we must talk about: doubt, racial justice and mental health.

1. **Doubt.** It is in young adulthood that the worldview and foundations of belief are often hardwired for life. This means that this time can be a particularly fruitful age for evangelism, as people are open to new ideas. But it also means that if they have grown up surrounded by faith, these years can see them push against their Christian upbringing.

A contributing factor to this is the sheer quantity of competing worldviews in 21st century Britain. Most young adults have a network of relationships in which a smorgasbord of grand narratives will be represented and believed. Naturally, this can lead them to

question and reconsider their own basis of faith and perspective, especially if inherited from parents.

When this happens, we must help young adults wrestle well with their doubts. Research on both sides of the Atlantic has found that a common cited reason why this generation leaves church is a failure to get this right.¹³ We must create environments and relationships where people feel safe to express doubt. We must have confidence in what we believe, but not give unhelpful, overly simplistic answers to people wrestling with complicated issues.

2. **Racial Justice.** 20s and 30s are acutely aware of the justice issues in society today. The fact that this generation are more globally connected than any other before them and have an instant stream of up-to-date newsfeeds means that world events and campaigns have a greater impact than ever before. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 highlighted the critically important issue of racial injustice, and younger age groups were at the heart of the protests that took place throughout 2020.¹⁴ This issue is both on the radar of this generation and it is close to the

¹³ www.discipleshipresearch.com/2018/02/losing-my-religion-millennials-and-faith-loss

¹⁴ www.ft.com/content/effbfc03-61f3-4f99-910c-8befe46a6c08

heart of God, therefore we should consider as a church how much we teach on it, discuss it and speak up on it. Listening to the perspectives of young adults will be important in this conversation.

3. **Mental health.** One of the common themes that emerges as we talk to church leaders and young adults is the prevalence of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. On a national level 16 million people in the UK experience a mental illness and 75 per cent of these begin before someone enters adulthood.¹⁵ A report by the Prince's Trust in 2019 found that 18

per cent of 16-25 year olds did not believe that life was worth living.¹⁶

There may be an interconnected web of contributing factors including rapid change in life circumstances, highly stressful work environments, struggles with money, family and, as some studies include, the prevalence of social media.¹⁷ As a church we must talk about these issues, be vulnerable about our own challenges, provide a safe, non-judgmental space for young adults to navigate them and, where possible, have members in mental health first aid who can support this generation struggling in this area.

Questions to consider:

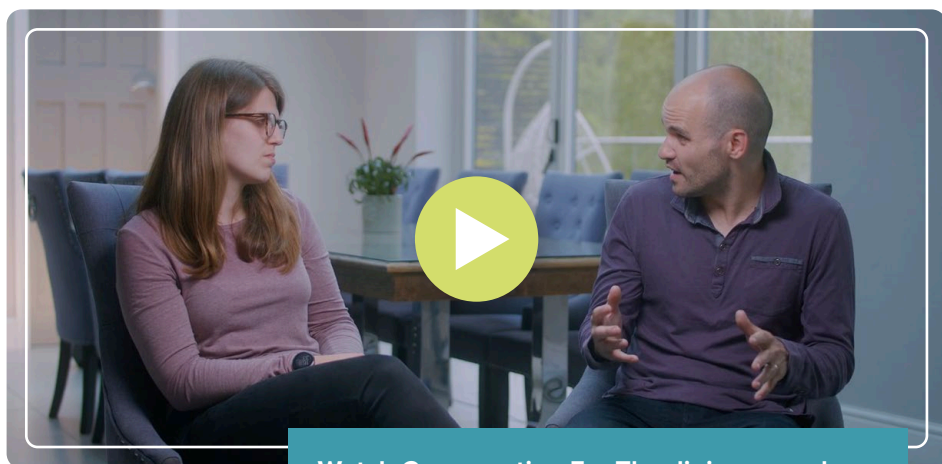
- How do we help young adults understand and work through doubt and see it as part of faith not its enemy?
- What are the relational vehicles that we have in place to walk alongside those who are struggling with aspects of faith that they have questions about?
- When we talk about the Bible, how do we encourage young adults to wrestle with it, whilst not losing any of its authority?
- How well equipped are we as a church to support those with anxiety and depression? What more could be done in this area?

¹⁵ www.theguardian.com/mental-health-research-matters/2017/jan/20/12-statistics-to-get-you-thinking-about-mental-health-in-young-people

^{16, 17} www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/youth-index-2019




Case study

Christ Church Balham is a lively evangelical church in South London. In the mornings, CCB often preach through a book in the Bible, but have decided to run an evening service called Dwell. These evenings look at different themes and difficult questions people might have about the Christian faith. It's a more intimate, casual service and gives people the opportunity to engage with a Q&A after the talk. Topics for these sessions have included mental health, doubt, suffering and equality. Jo, a young adult who attends the church with her husband, says, "I really appreciate that every time we explore a difficult subject, the minister will pray something at the end that goes along the lines of 'Father, if I have said anything that was not of You, please let us forget it.' It demonstrates real humility."



Watch Conversation 5 – The dining room here

Take it further:

-  [Talking about racial justice with young adults](#)
-  [Dare to have the difficult conversations](#)
-  [Climate justice: a priority for young adults but not the church?](#)

Conversation 6

The games room: Everyone gets to play

Some sociologists have referred to young adults as the paradoxical generation because of the competing narratives and tensions that exist within them. One such paradox is the high value placed on individualism on one hand versus the desire to find themselves in community on the other. A further paradox, relevant to this conversation, is the strong attraction of this generation to consumerism¹⁸, which coincides with a powerful drive to participate, contribute and create.

This is a conversation about participation, and it takes place in the games room, where everyone gets to play.

In recent years, the way we all interact with media has significantly changed. Technological advances in the 20th century meant that information could be broadcast from one source to millions of people via radio and television. It was the age of mass

media. Today, young adults do engage with information in this way to some extent, but social media plays a more significant part in their lives, and it operates in a completely different way to mass media. Through social media, users don't just consume information but interact with it and create content themselves.¹⁹

The challenge is that, traditionally, our church services have tended to be based on a mass-media model. Whilst there are participative elements, such as communion and sung worship, most of our communication from the front is done from a broadcast mindset. Based on the cultural trends we have described, it is worth giving significant thought to how we increase participation in our meetings. Whilst we are not suggesting that church members vote to influence the way a sermon is delivered, we must consider how we can make all that we do more interactive.

¹⁸ Huntley, R. (2006). *The World According to Y*. Allen and Unwin.

¹⁹ James Emery White explains that one of the facets of the 'wifi enabled' generation is a deeply held desire to dream and cocreate. Emery White, J. (2017). *Meet Generation Z*. Baker.

Furthermore, if young adults have a deep desire to play a part, how do we empower this generation to find a place in serving the mission of the church in a way that uses and develops their gifts? Churches that attract and thrive amongst this age group do two further things in this area: first, if they choose to have groups specifically for this age group (they find ways to allow them to be self-led and encourage indigenous leaders); second, they deliberately have used young adults in visible roles, so that others in this age group can see that there are people like them in that community and with an opportunity to serve.

Questions to consider:

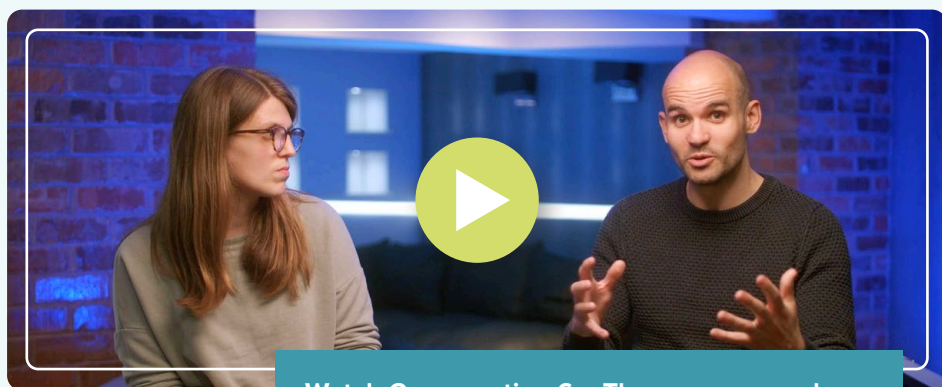
- What are the implications when moving from a mass-media approach and posture to a social media one?
- How do we maintain clarity of communication and stay 'on message' when encouraging dialogue as well as monologue?
- How do we empower and give platform and profile to young adults and facilitate the self-leadership of young adults in church activity?



Case study

Cornerstone Church is an FIEC church in Nottingham with a thriving 20s and 30s ministry. John Russell is the lead minister and elder at the church and over the last year has realised that adding questions at the end of the Sunday talk has increased engagement. If you're online, the questions come up on the screen, so people are able to share thoughts on the chat. Also, at in-person services, there are questions to reflect on and discuss during their mid-week groups. This is a great example of the connection between communication and participation; sharing a message and then encouraging others to bring their own thoughts to the table.

The King's Cross foodbank was started in April 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and since then many families and individuals regularly receive weekly food parcels in the local area. Their 50 volunteers are made up almost entirely of young adults, including the foodbank manager and core team, many of whom stepped up when they couldn't find work or were furloughed.



Watch Conversation 6 – The games room here

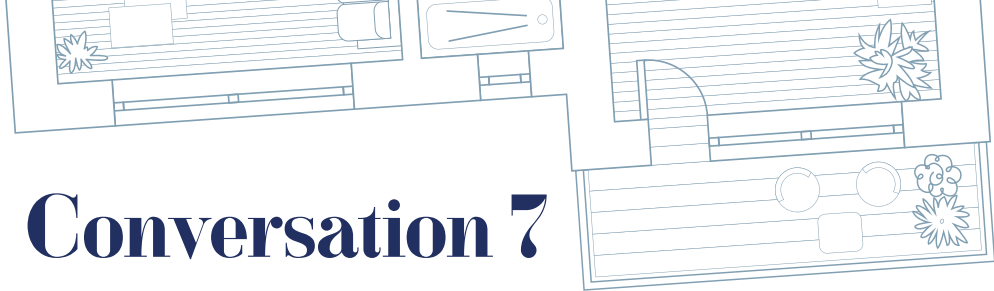
Take it further:



[Activism and burnout](#)



[Three top tips for encouraging interactivity](#)



Conversation 7

The garden: Evangelism

There are hopeful signs that significant numbers of young adults will become Christians in the coming years. But what will be the common pathways to faith? How can we make the most of the opportunities that we have to communicate the good news to this generation and invite them to follow Jesus?

This is a conversation about evangelism, and it takes place in the garden.

The garden is an apt image for mission and evangelism. As well as being the area of welcome outside the house itself, its bedrock is the soil out of which everything grows. In this conversation we will consider what that soil is like, how we can prepare it to receive the seed of the gospel and how we best communicate the message of Jesus to young adults.

The soil in which we find ourselves presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that the prevailing western culture is post-Christian, pluralistic, liberal and secular. Moreover, this generation is naturally suspicious of anything that appears traditional or institutional and naturally resists commitment.²⁰

On the other hand, whilst not choosing to identify with traditional religion, there has not been a wholesale shift to atheism. We should be aware and encouraged that even though most young adults would not identify as a practising Christian, they are spiritually hungry and open to exploring faith, meaning and purpose. Sixty per cent of all British adults say miracles are possible, but the percentage is higher than any other age group (almost 75 per cent) among 18-24 year olds.²¹

²⁰ Research from the Vatican found that 70% of British young people are 'not religious'
www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-43485581

During the pandemic, between a third and a half of all UK young adults attended an online church service, and one in 20 of all adults began to pray.²²

So how do we best reach them? The first and most natural and effective way is through young adults themselves. Where authority is viewed with suspicion, and at a time when high value is placed on authentic friendship, a critical factor in most 18-30s journey to faith will be seeing and hearing from a Christian friend or colleague. Therefore, a key question for us is, how are we equipping and inspiring this age group to reach their friends?²³

The next consideration is that young adults are open to inviting their friends to church. As a church, we must think about how we not only encourage this but also provide an environment where young adult Christians feel comfortable inviting their friends. Listening to young adults will be critical here.

Finally, we must think about the words we use when we communicate the gospel. In a post-Christian, anti-religious world, much of our language

will fail to connect with people, so we must think carefully about how we talk about the Bible and communicate the timeless gospel with confidence and clarity.

Questions to consider:

- How can we equip and inspire young adult Christians to share their faith with their friends? How are we modelling relational, invitational evangelism across the whole church?
- How do we make sure we are listening to the voices of young adults in creating an environment into which they feel excited about inviting their friends?
- How do we communicate the gospel relevantly in language that this generation understands?

²¹ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45679730

²² www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/the-missing-generation

²³ The 2015 Talking Jesus study found that most non-Christians know a Christian and that that person is most likely to be a friend. www.talkingjesus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Talking-Jesus.pdf



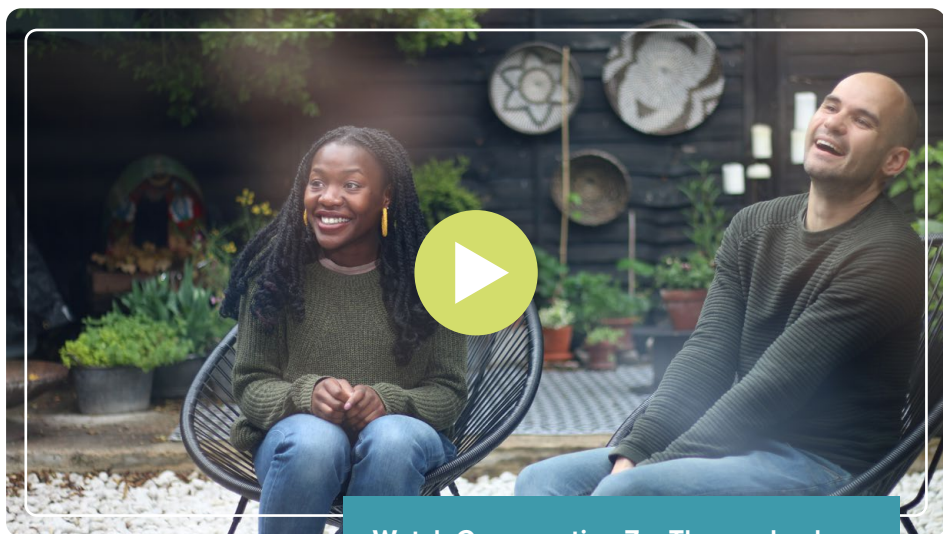


Case study

Lauren is part of a small group at her church, Charlotte Chapel Baptist Church. The church run weekly small groups which are focussed around relationship and reading the Bible together. A friend in her small group, Hugh, invited their friend Sally, who was not yet a Christian, to join in. The group simply provided warm community and relationship as they explored faith together weekly and shared life together. The space was made as accessible as possible for non-Christians, although to start with, prayer seemed “a bit weird”. Over time, however, things began to make more sense, and at the church weekend away, Sally became a Christian.

One of the ways we have seen young adults come to faith recently is through the digital space. Issy found herself, in her words, on “the Christian side of TikTok”, which began a journey of faith for her. The next stage was crucial. She reached out to a Christian friend, who invited her to Alpha and bought her a Bible. In the weeks following this she reached a point where she committed her life to following Jesus. [You can watch Issy’s full story here.](#)

Both these stories show the variety of ways that a journey of discipleship can initially start, but also that relationship and community play a central role for young adults coming to faith.



Watch Conversation 7 – The garden here

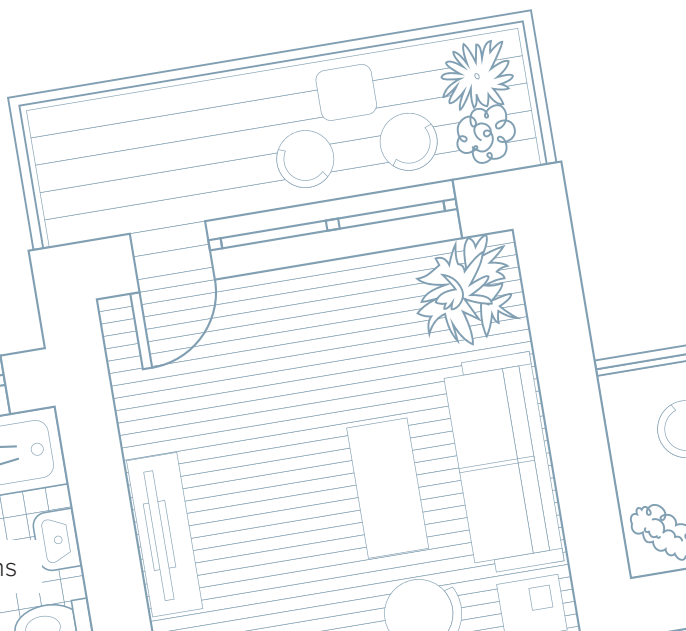
Take it further:



[Viral: a generation poised for rapid faith-sharing](#)



[Evangelism through sport for young adults](#)



Moving the conversation forward

Once you have had the discussions in each of the ‘rooms’ with your teams, write a list of tangible action points. Here are a few examples based on each conversation:

1. The hallway: welcome

- ☐ Review welcome journey.
- ☐ Overhaul website with a newcomer audience in mind.
- ☐ Create focus group to look at social media presence.

2. The living room: community

- ☐ Meet with small group leaders and review support for them.
- ☐ Audit the age range of small groups.

3. The study: leadership

- ☐ Identify two young adult leaders and invite them to be part of the leadership team.
- ☐ Host annual ‘ask the leadership’ session to help transparency.

4. The kitchen: communication

- ☐ Listen back to the last three talks and evaluate the content as a balance between right brain and left brain.
- ☐ Find three podcasts/YouTube channels that we would recommend to our church to supplement their learning through the week.

5. The dining room: doubt

- ☐ Invite the church family to tell you the difficult questions they have about faith and plan a talk series around it.
- ☐ Begin a mentoring programme in which younger and older generations are invited to spend intentional time together.

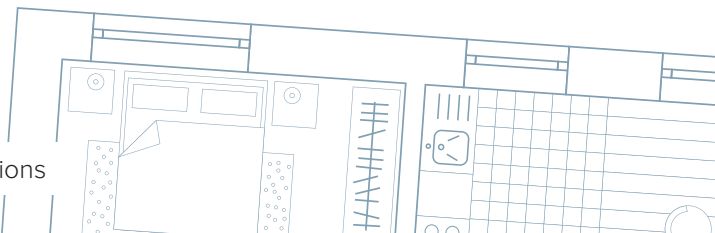
6. The games room: participation

- ☐ Introduce one more interactive element into each Sunday service.
- ☐ Introduce a regular time of reflection after/during talks when people are encouraged to turn to the people around them and discuss and pray with one another.
- ☐ Identify three young adults to involve in the church's ministry. Have a conversation with them about their heart and gifts and find a way to let them use that gift in the life of the church.

7. The garden: evangelism

- ☐ Run a series aimed at equipping people to share their faith with their friends.
- ☐ Plan an invitational event with younger generations that simply enables people to invite friends and meet other Christians.

A list this long would take a great deal of work to implement, so you may want to write a complete wish list and then prayerfully choose two or three to strategically begin with. The important thing is to do something and keep the conversation moving.

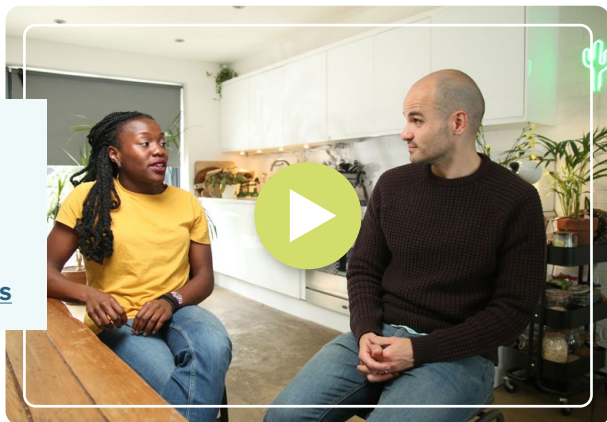


To the future

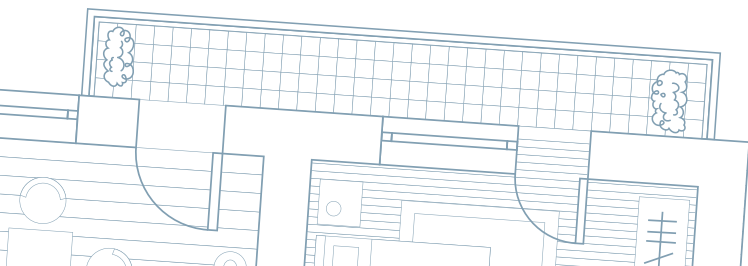
We hope that 7 Conversations fills you with more hope than fear. We hope that an expanded knowledge of culture and an exploration of the rooms leads to exciting innovation that makes a difference in people's lives.

If this resource has been helpful, we would love to hear your story. We dream of a church thriving amongst all generations and significant numbers of young adults coming to faith in Jesus. We hope that these conversations help you to be significantly more effective among 20s and 30s.

Don't forget you can go deeper with blogs and a supplementary film for each conversation at eauk.org/7-conversations



If you have an encouraging story for us or would value talking to one of our team about facilitating the Young Adult conversations in your church please drop us a line at information@eauk.org





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