



Ministry at the Crossroads: Lutheran Campus Ministry's Power and Peril

JACOB SORENSON AND ROLAND MARTINSON

Lutheran Campus Ministry (LCM) offers a decisive counternarrative to the faith attrition and disengagement among emerging adults across the church. This unique, impactful ministry has remained largely under-studied, though it offers insight into how churches might engage the current cohort of emerging adults and accompany them throughout their lives. Rather than focus on the changing demographic and cultural realities or offering another theoretical essay on the needs of young adults, our research sought ministry sites that were actively engaged in the messy realities of ministry as they imaginatively worked on new challenges. Our investigation uncovered particular stories of powerful impact along with an expansive narrative of campus ministry's contribution to the ecology of emerging-adult faith formation. Our findings reveal effective strategies for campus ministries, the importance of partnerships among the diverse ministries of the church, and promising practices for ministry with emerging adults in a variety of contexts.

The Lutheran Campus Ministry Study sought to identify and explore the characteristics, practices, and challenges of faithful, effective Lutheran campus and emerging adult ministries in the face of the real-life student sensibilities within the ongoing changes in higher education. The study, conducted in 2017, included a robust literature search; site visits (6); interviews with campus ministers (16),

Lutherans have built a wide network of campus ministries that reach out to members of educational communities across America. These ministries can often reach out to students at a very formative period of their lives, in important and life-changing ways. But these ministries are also under stress from decline in funding and the pressures of fund-raising.

students (12), university staff (6), area Lutheran pastors (7), and board members (6); and a survey of more than 800 university students connected with Lutheran Campus Ministries at 140 campuses across the United States.

The Lutheran Campus Ministry Network, known as LuMin, is rooted in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and has an active ministry presence on more than 230 colleges and universities across the United States. While the ELCA has twenty-six affiliated colleges and universities, the ministries of LuMin serve non-ELCA campuses, most of them large public universities. These ministries vary in size, scope, and structure. About a third of them are housed in ELCA churches or are themselves organized as congregations, while another third operate as ELCA ministry centers located on or near university campuses. Most of the remaining centers are ecumenical or interfaith ministries. The diverse ministries of LuMin are united by four core values: building community, deepening faith, expanding minds, and inspiring service.¹ In 2017, LuMin reported engaging more than five thousand students in worship services and logging more than forty-eight thousand hours of service, mostly in these ministries' local communities.² Campus ministers reported strong engagement with the campus community, including teaching courses, providing pastoral care to faculty and staff, and serving on university ethics committees or emergency response teams. Ministry with the student community was one aspect of a more expansive ministry.

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We found that Lutheran Campus Ministry student communities had three key elements: they were expansively welcoming, grounded in Christian faith, and reached out to others. *Welcoming* was the most frequently used descriptor of campus ministry, and an overwhelming 97 percent of survey participants agreed that LCM provides a welcoming, inclusive, and safe space. A University of Arizona student summed it up: "It doesn't matter who you are—race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, your gender, where you come from. We try to welcome everyone." The litmus test for this expansive welcome in 2017 was outspoken inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons.³ In addition to expansive welcome, community identity was grounded in a thoughtful, progressive understanding of the Christian faith and teachings that connected with many students' childhood faiths, especially those who were raised Lutheran. The student communities intentionally reached out to other people by providing opportunities to make a difference in the lives of those in need through

¹ lumin-network.com.

² Don Romsa, "Annual Report of ELCA Campus Ministry," Fall 2017.

³ LGBTQ+ is an acronym in common usage among campus ministry participants that refers to a broad community including people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, among others.

service and advocacy. Students gathered around these three priorities and found in these communities something that was personally impactful and dependable, especially in times of need.

MINISTRY WITH EMERGING ADULTS

Emerging adulthood is widely recognized as a distinct life stage in developed countries around the world. It is defined by a persistent state of instability and feeling *in between* the stage of adolescence and what society recognizes as adulthood. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett characterizes it as the age of possibilities and hope, when people have “unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.”⁴ Emerging adulthood is a relatively new cultural construct brought about through enormous demographic shifts that involve young people delaying traditional markers of adulthood like marriage, having children, buying a home, and achieving financial independence. It is an age of intense decision-making and identity formation at a time when individuality and authenticity are highly valued.

Andrew Root argues that we, in the United States, are in an *age of authenticity*, in which we “see ourselves on a journey to make meaning, seeking to be loyal (often only) to what speaks to us, to what engages us, to what moves us.”⁵ He notes that people value (even idolize) the idea of youthfulness because it is seen as the most authentic stage of life. The young people we encountered on campuses across the country found this sought-after authenticity in Lutheran Campus Ministries.

There are complex challenges in ministry with emerging adults, particularly on large university campuses. The rate of societal change has accelerated, due in large part to tremendous technological advances. Society has gone from personal computers to the internet to cell phones to smartphones and wearable technology in the span of a single generation. Today’s young people are accustomed to being plugged in, globally connected, available, and watched. Mobile-device usage was ubiquitous among our survey participants, including 55 percent using their devices for three or more hours every day. Higher education has struggled to keep pace with the rapid changes by offering nontraditional programs of study and virtual learning.

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⁴ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

⁵ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), xx.

Findings from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA indicate that educational costs and concerns about student debt have spiked. They demonstrate that students are under tremendous strain, with diagnoses of mental-health problems, especially anxiety and depression, on the rise.⁶ In our student survey, almost a third of respondents had been diagnosed with clinical anxiety or depression, and half reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” monthly or more. A student from Oregon State described her feelings in the first weeks of college as “chaos everywhere” but that she settled in when she learned to accept “that’s just what college feels like.”

Ministry in this volatile climate is complicated by dramatic increases in secularity and religious pluralism. A growing percentage of emerging adults are skeptical, indifferent, or openly hostile toward Christianity, joining a new classification for those claiming no religious affiliation, the so-called *Nones*. Elizabeth Drescher notes that, according to 2014 Pew Research statistics, almost half (49 percent) of children growing up Lutheran left the church by adulthood, including 20 percent joining the broad category of *Nones*.⁷ She also observes that there is great diversity and often deep spiritual longing among those who have opted out of religion. She writes, “Often ‘religion’ failed for Nones not only because it was seen as dull, formulaic, rule-bound, or corrupt, but also because it tended to over-write self-identity in ways that seemed to compromise personal integrity and authenticity.”⁸ In the age of authenticity, emerging adults are comfortable exploring religious options or even opting out of religion altogether. The numbers are staggering and getting worse for traditional church structures.

Robert Wuthnow has demonstrated that younger adults, particularly those who are single and have no children, are much less likely to be involved in church or find religion important in their lives than previous generations.⁹ The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) found that only 45 percent of emerging adults attended religious services more than a few times a year, with 35 percent never attending. The director of that study, Christian Smith, noted, “The overall story is clearly one of general religious decline among youth transitioning from the teenage years into emerging adulthood.”¹⁰ David Kinnaman of Barna Group puts an even finer point on it, “Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement.”¹¹

⁶ Kevin Eagan, Ellen Bara Stolzenberg, Hilary B. Zimmerman, Melissa C. Aragon, Hannah Whang Sayson, and Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016*, (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, 2016), 7–11, PDF, <https://tinyurl.com/yayfy7cd>.

⁷ Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

⁸ Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 45–46.

⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 62–65.

¹⁰ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 112–118.

¹¹ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 22.

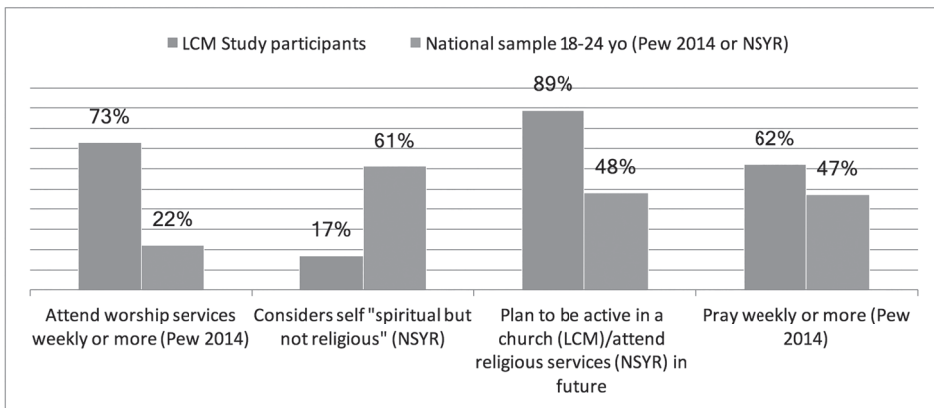
THE COUNTERNARRATIVE OF LUTHERAN CAMPUS MINISTRY

I'm still working on my relationship with God. I don't feel it's at the same point that it was before, but I'm working toward a newer point, and it's probably never going to be the same relationship with God. It might be better, it might be different, but it's definitely changing. (University of Arizona student)

One of the major findings of the Lutheran Campus Ministry Study is LCM's role in sustaining student faith. These students bucked the cultural expectation of setting aside childhood values in the "identity lockbox" that Tim Clydesdale describes in favor of actively exploring their faith in light of the instability and challenges of emerging adulthood.¹² Figure 1 shows the tremendous differences between LCM survey participants and the general population of college-age young people in the United States, drawn from Pew Research and the NSYR. Those active in LCM student communities were much more likely than their peers to attend worship services, pray on their own, and plan to be active in church in the future.

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Figure 1: LCM study responses in comparison with national sample of 18-24 year olds



¹² Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

The LCM young people were highly religious, and their faith was grounded in traditional Christian teachings and practices. They agreed that the Holy Spirit is active in the world (92 percent), that Jesus rose from the dead (87 percent), and that God created the world (87 percent). They found high value in traditional faith practices, most especially worship-service attendance. They looked a lot like what Smith calls “committed traditionalists,” which he estimates make up 15 percent of all emerging adults, though LCM participants put their traditional belief structures in conversation with progressive cultural ideas.¹³

Most participants were continuing the faith of their childhood, demonstrating campus ministry's place in an intricate ecology of faith formation. A student from UNC-Chapel Hill explained her faith trajectory: “The things that I did in my home church are things that we do here and are things that we do in Lutheran churches that I go to on weekends and at camp. I like the consistency there.” More than half of all study participants (55 percent) were, like this student, *Active ELCA* young people. Almost all of the *Active ELCA* group were confirmed (98 percent), attended church at least multiple times per month in middle school (99 percent) and high school (94 percent), and participated in Vacation Bible School (94 percent). A large majority also attended church youth group at least monthly (78 percent), overnight Christian summer camp (76 percent), and at least one church retreat or lock-in (84 percent). About half (48 percent) attended the triannual ELCA national youth gathering at least once. Like the student from Chapel Hill, most saw involvement in LCM as a continuation of their specifically Lutheran faith journey, identifying a desire to participate in a Lutheran ministry as the most important motivating factor for involvement.

Some of the most effective programs found ways to connect students with local congregations. Luther House at Oregon State did not even conduct worship services but, instead, encouraged students to worship at local congregations.

Another 27 percent of survey respondents grew up highly active in other Christian traditions, predominantly those that frequently partner with ELCA campus ministries: Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. This means that about four out of five campus ministry participants had been active in the Christian church for their entire lives. Campus ministry had sustained their faith journey during a critical time of transition and instability. As another UNC-Chapel Hill student said, “It's not like you grow up and *boom*, you're there and everything's good. It's a journey of continuing to struggle with some parts of the faith and struggle with your relationship with God. But it's the journey. Sometimes it's going to be stormy. Sometimes it's going to be sunny.”

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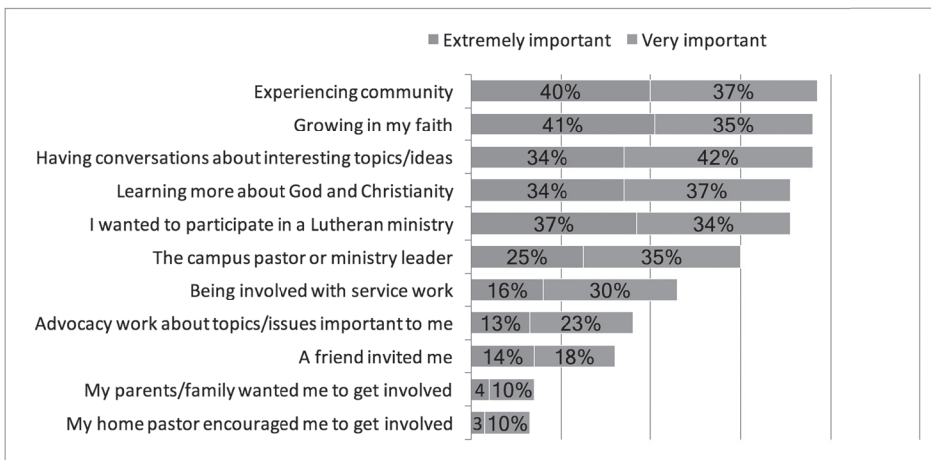
¹³ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 166.

services but, instead, encouraged students to worship at local congregations. The congregationally based ministry at UNC-Chapel Hill ran a program in which students were adopted by families in the congregation, building meaningful relationships over the course of several years and connecting students with people of faith working in their chosen fields. In other cases, congregations provided food for campus ministry events as well as funding.

Not every student involved in campus ministry was on a trajectory from childhood faith to adult discipleship. About 13 percent were sporadic churchgoers throughout childhood or had a period of engagement followed by disengaging from church participation, often following confirmation. Another 6 percent grew up as *Nones*. These students discovered meaningful connection to a faith community through LCM. Some were returning to their childhood faith in a time of struggle or crisis, while others were discovering for the first time an expression of Christianity that felt authentic. Some previously saw Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical, or exclusionary. The radical welcome of LCM changed their perspectives. A student at Syracuse described feeling “religiously in limbo” and appreciative of having a safe space “to figure out what to actually believe.” Part of setting the table for those with differing viewpoints was the ubiquitous practice of LCM offering meals for students. Community meals often included worship services, and they frequently served as time for open conversation, directed discussion, or Christian education.

These campus ministries were working through tough questions and engaging students in their passions and particular life stories. One campus minister said, “We are trying to facilitate a kind of faith that integrates what they are learning in their classrooms.” Three-quarters of survey respondents indicated that having conversations about interesting topics and questions was an important motivating factor in their involvement in the faith community. Many also valued campus ministry’s involvement in service work or advocacy work about issues that were important to them (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Motivating factors for students to become involved and stay involved with LCM (n=849)



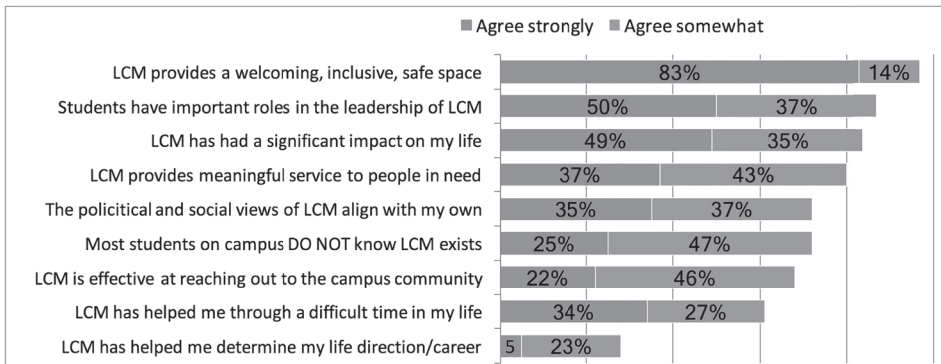
IMPACTING THE LIVES OF STUDENTS

I was kind of lost, but in the last two years, I've not only found myself again, I've been more proud of myself and just who I am and accepted that. Campus ministry was a catalyst in my recovery . . . they didn't go away. (UNC-Chapel Hill student)

Students became involved with campus ministry in a variety of ways, but there were three major reasons that they stayed involved: a personally meaningful experience, help through a crisis, or involvement in leadership. These three factors offer insight to other ministries hoping to engage emerging adults. They might walk in your door for similar reasons to those that got students involved in LCM: a community meal, an invitation from a friend, or a desire for something familiar from their childhood. In order to retain these young people, however, ministries must matter in their lives.

In the student survey, the most significant factor separating those who were regularly involved (weekly or almost every week) with those who were only occasionally involved or uninvolved was agreement with the statement “LCM has had a significant impact on my life.” In total, 84 percent of participants agreed with this statement. Specific impacts were highly individualized and varied from student to student. For example, a student at the University of Arizona was planning a career in science and struggling to figure out how faith interacted with his work in a largely secular field. He reflected, “Our trip to Haiti and conversations with our campus pastor changed my major and my life. I've decided to become a scientist working on hunger and feeding the growing world population.”

Figure 3: Student perceptions of Lutheran Campus Ministry (LCM)



A majority of students (61 percent) agreed that LCM had helped them through a difficult time in life. One student at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire explained his moving story of journeying “out of the depths of despair,” concluding, “campus ministry literally saved my life.” Other students discovered a

place of healing and hope after experiences of significant trauma, including rape, a death in their immediate family, physical or emotional abuse, and attempted suicide. Almost half of survey respondents (45 percent) had one or more of these traumatic experiences in their lives, including 16 percent reporting one in the past year. Especially among students with sporadic or inconsistent faith experiences through childhood, help through life challenges or crises led them to become involved and stay involved in campus ministries.

Another significant factor of increased involvement was agreement with the item “students have important roles in the leadership of LCM.” Almost a third (31 percent) of survey respondents reported that they served on the leadership team of LCM at their university, and there were individual sites with nearly 40 percent of their involved students in leadership roles. Involving students in leadership gives them ownership of the programs and meaningful agency in putting their faith into action.

FAITHFUL WITNESS IN A SEA OF SECULARITY

There are a lot of people that will tell you that a life of faith is not important for different reasons: because Christians get a bad rap, because science explains everything, and that sort of thing. That experience has, in some ways, made me question but also, in some ways, it has strengthened my faith. (UNC-Chapel Hill student)

Lutheran Campus Ministries are niche communities on huge campuses that are largely indifferent or openly antagonistic to Christianity. LCM has the opportunity for public witness and “a prophetic role,” as one campus minister put it. Their presence provides direct contact with a diversity of religious viewpoints and on-the-ground access to the research, dialogue, and discussion of the nation’s finest institutions of learning in an era of expansive discovery and development. Many campus ministers had established trusted relationships with university faculty and staff members. Some were invited to teach courses on religion, and many served as valued members of interfaith councils or partnered with campus advocacy groups.

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The relatively small groups of students that gathered for weekly worship, meals, and faith discussions extended their ministry presence through service and advocacy on campus and in the local community. In fact, participation in service projects and advocacy work were some of the primary avenues of engagement

for many survey participants that grew up as *Nones*. Some sites offered service-learning trips to distant locations, but more sites frequently engaged in local service. Students at Syracuse University were actively engaged in outreach to the local poor and immigrant communities; their campus pastor involved them in service work related to their field of study, usually through an area congregation or non-governmental organization. Students at other sites participated in and even helped organize campus demonstrations for the rights of immigrants, people of color, and other vulnerable groups, most notably the LGBTQ+ community.

The inclusive and affirming witness of LCM offered a counternarrative to the dominant cultural understanding of Christianity among emerging adults, which Kinnaman sums up as “overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive, and doubtless.”¹⁴ There was a strong sense among interviewees and survey participants that evangelical Christian groups on campus had co-opted the Christian narrative. A student at the University of Arizona explained, “We are being seen as the religion that doesn’t like Muslims or doesn’t like homosexuals or doesn’t like people who aren’t cis—if they’re trans or whatever. And that’s not what Christianity is. God loves all.” Campus ministry was serving as a witness to a secular society and embodying a progressive, theologically grounded understanding of Christianity.

VULNERABILITY

In the midst of the impactful narratives and expansive potential of Lutheran Campus Ministry, there were vulnerabilities. Most stemmed from financial concerns. Our investigation took place in the midst of dwindling financial support from most synods. Board members and campus ministers recounted sober discussions about financial difficulties and their efforts to keep ministries funded. Most sites conducted extensive fundraising; others were finding creative long-term solutions, like a building project at UT-Austin that promised to help fund the ministry via rental charges. The bulk of fundraising fell on campus ministers, who were already stretched and were not trained as development directors. In 2017, “most Lutheran Campus Ministry staff reported devoting anywhere from 10 percent to 25 percent of their time to fundraising efforts.”¹⁵ One campus ministry board member noted, “We could spend that energy doing programming for students, but instead we spend it on fundraising because we have to.” The impacts of these financial pressures include higher burnout among campus pastors and fewer programs for students.

Many of the campus ministry communities were small, some engaging fewer than twenty students regularly. Outreach was one of the struggles indicated in both the interviews and the student survey. Many of the outreach challenges were attributed to limited staffing and resources; the more financially stable ministries

¹⁴ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 92–93.

¹⁵ Romsa, “Annual Report of ELCA Campus Ministry,” 6.

tended to have higher participation. Another factor complicating outreach is a diminishment of the ELCA network, with fewer young people confirmed and participating in high-school ministries, as well as fewer students involved because their home pastor encouraged them (only 13 percent). Some campus ministries had become reliant on this so-called “Lutheran pipeline” and had difficulty expanding beyond “those who walk in the door,” as one board member noted. It is becoming evident to many LCM leaders that they must adopt new models of outreach and visibility on campus through intentional visioning and redesign.

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One of the largest challenges for campus ministries is board development. Student communities are by their very nature transient, putting tremendous authority (and pressure) on the campus pastor to ensure stability. We found that effective leadership by the campus minister was essential for a vibrant ministry. Campus minister transitions, particularly after long tenures, often caused turmoil and uncertainty. It seems to many that stronger, more effective boards of directors could greatly benefit these ministries by relieving fundraising burdens from the campus minister, providing much-needed ministry support, facilitating leadership transitions, and spearheading creative visioning sessions to reimagine ministry models.

CONCLUSION

Lutheran Campus Ministries are engaged in essential work for universities and the church, serving as important Lutheran voices in academic and interfaith communities and directly ministering with a critical age group that has increasingly disengaged from faith. Our investigations reveal that campus ministries are making substantial differences in the lives of particular students and their universities even as they are stressed and vulnerable.

Campus ministries rely upon and enhance other ministries of the church. They are an important element in an ecology of faith formation that includes families, congregations, camps, denominational structures, service ministries, and more. Most LCM students were impacted by these other ministries, and their LCM involvement has sustained them in a life of faith during a critical time of transition. They planned to continue their lives of faith after graduation, with most (89 percent) planning to remain active in a church and others hoping to participate in year-long service ministries (19 percent) or attend seminary (9 percent).

These ministries offer insight to others working in emerging adult ministries. The importance of providing an inclusive and welcoming community stands out. Campus ministries also engage emerging adults in ministry that is personally meaningful, are present with them through challenging or traumatic times, and involve them in leadership. These are communities that emerging adults find authentic, engaging, and impactful. They are ministries essential to the ongoing vitality of the church and society. ☩

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