

# The **CONNECTED** Generation

A Barna Report Produced in  
Partnership with World Vision

*How Christian Leaders Around the  
World Can Strengthen Faith &  
Well-Being Among 18-35-Year-Olds*



**WORLD VISION CANADA  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# In 2019, World Vision embarked on a global research project with Barna,

**an independent research firm that specializes in insights on faith and culture, to better understand the enigmatic generation of 18-35 year-olds.**

The initial study included more than 16,000 young adults speaking nine different languages across 25 countries, including 1,000 survey respondents from Canada. In 2021, realizing the COVID-19 pandemic impacted so many facets of daily life, including religious participation, World Vision Canada repeated the survey with another 1,014 respondents to see what might have changed.

The range of survey questions explored the aspirations of the world's first cohort of digital natives, their feelings and opinions about community and connectivity, their life goals and priorities and - perhaps of special interest to Canadian church leaders - the feelings of this generation toward church, faith, spirituality and religion.

In Canada, many of the young adults who participated in the survey already attended church before the pandemic. Researchers were able to investigate how COVID-19 shaped the lives of this cohort, including their desire to attend church online and return (or not) to church when it is back in person. There is no other data like this right now in Canada that is focused on the lived experience of young adults through the pandemic, in relation to the Church. We hope it will be practical and helpful for you as you lead your church forward after such a tumultuous time.

This brand-new, two-wave research can help us all explore how to encourage people back to church after COVID-19, and to invite 18-35 year-olds specifically into the kind of genuine, impactful, faith community they are telling us they desire and perhaps are surprisingly open to joining.

Some of what you are about to read may startle you. You might feel deep concern for this generation as you read about their high rates of anxiety and worry about the future. But there is hope and encouragement in these pages too. You will also see the resilience and openness of Canadian Millennials and Gen Z: our future Canadian leaders.

At World Vision, being faithful to Christ and our mission has always meant partnering with the Church to address poverty and injustice. Healthy local churches in communities around the world have the potential to be powerful conduits of love, justice, healing and reconciliation. Churches can do this work so well. This research is an invitation to explore how we can invite young adults into church communities, sharing their amazing talents, engaging them in our world's needs and making us all stronger and better by their presence.



**MICHAEL MESSENGER**  
*PRESIDENT & CEO*  
*WORLD VISION CANADA*

# WHO IS THE CONNECTED GENERATION?

In Canada, Millennials are the generation that was born roughly between 1980 and 1996. Gen Z followed them, born between 1997 and 2012.



**16,383**

Young people 18-35 were surveyed



**1,014**

Canadians participated in the survey\*

\*(+14 from 2019-2021)



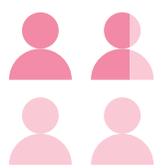
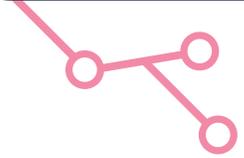
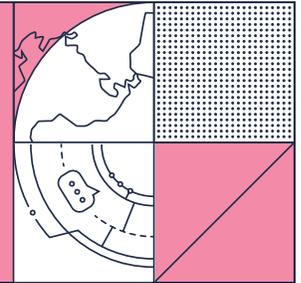
**3 in 10**

Canadian young adults said "faith is very important to me".

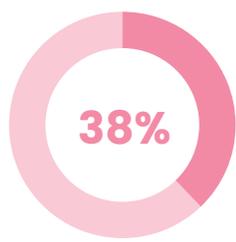
- This is a globally minded, deeply connected and plugged-in cohort, the world's first digital natives.
- They were born and bred in the digital era and now live as natives in a culture dominated by social media and online communities.
- Millennial's and Gen Z's priorities are to establish themselves financially and professionally first, before they have families. Entrepreneurship is an attractive option for them.
- Friends and family relationships matter to this cohort, and they long for deeper, personal connections.
- They don't want to be someone's project. Gen Z and Millennials want to be involved, make a difference and contribute to anything they're involved with.
- The Connected Generation are truth-wrestlers. They ask questions. Dialogue and debate are welcomed.
- They are spiritually open but the reputation of the Church is in decline for Gen Z and Millennials in Canada, even for those who identify as Christian.
- COVID-19 has impacted the church-going experience of Canadian young adults, with one-third saying they likely won't return to church.

**LET'S GO DEEPER INTO SOME OF THE KEY FINDINGS.**

# THIS IS THE AGE OF ANXIETY



42% OF RESPONDENTS SAY THEY FEEL LONELY AT LEAST WEEKLY, AND



OF THOSE EXPERIENCING LONELINESS SAY IT IS UNBEARABLE.

**For this study, we defined anxiety as “often feeling” at least three of these emotions:**

- Anxious about important decisions
- Sad or depressed
- Insecure in who I am
- Afraid to fail

## CONSIDER:

What can church and faith communities offer a generation that often feels lonely and anxious? How can connecting with a global community help young people feel more connected to each other and the world?

**Inner battles with fear, worry and anxiety. Concerns about their future and the future of the planet. A deep and common loneliness, even while being so connected to others through social media.**

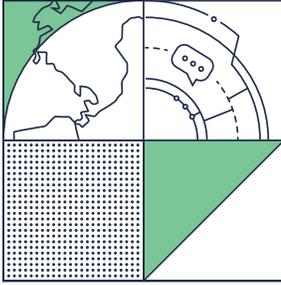
The inner emotional life of the Connected Generation is complex and sometimes full of pain. An equal number of 18-35 year-olds reported feeling “deeply cared for” and “lonely and isolated.” Despite their digital communities, young Canadians told us they often feel lonely, with **42% (almost half) reporting weekly loneliness**. Of that group, 38% of those experiencing loneliness say it is “unbearable”. These admissions of loneliness are getting worse, with 7% fewer young Canadians feeling “deeply cared for” in 2021, compared to in 2019.

With a generation that prioritizes vocation and financial wellness, it's not surprising to learn that worry about those areas is dominant. Nearly half (46%) of those surveyed said they feel uncertain about their future and many (44%) are anxious about important decisions. In fact, **less than one-third reported they feel optimistic about the future.**

## LONELINESS IS A DAILY EXPERIENCE...

**Think back on your past 7 days. How often would you say you felt lonely?**

1. All of the time
2. For at least some of each day
3. Not daily, but on at least one day
4. Not at all



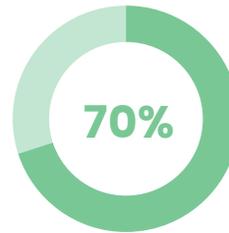
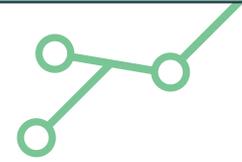
# ENGAGEMENT WITH SPIRITUALITY & THE CHURCH

**They may not necessarily like what they know about the Church, but this generation is confident in the existence of “spiritual forces.” Many young Canadian adults (28%) reported that faith is “very important” to them, and 36% went further to say that their religious faith is very important in their life today.**

But as the Church, we have our work cut out for us if we want to rehabilitate the perception of organized religion held by this generation. **The proportion of Millennial Christians who feel the Christian Church is ‘harmful’ or ‘detrimental’ has doubled between 2019 and 2021.**

Not surprisingly, young adults say that the hypocrisy of religious people is the biggest reason they doubt there is anything spiritual. And those who grew up in the Christian faith but have left it – and those who still identify as Christian but don’t often attend – view the Church as politically problematic and judgemental. This view flows over to Church teachings as well.

**And yet...still there is that spiritual openness within this generation,** with a significant number leaning toward seeing religion as good and important. Those who attend church regularly (we call them Resilient Disciples), miss seeing their friends there. They are hoping for social gatherings, mutual relationships based on caring for each other, and opportunities to serve those living with poverty or other struggles.



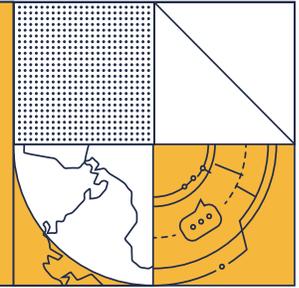
OF YOUNG ADULTS HAVE DROPPED OUT OF CHURCH.

## CONSIDER:

It is interesting to note that 49% of non-churchgoers reported they are more interested in knowing that Christianity is “good” than knowing it is “true”, while 40% of churchgoers who answered that question feel that good is more important than true. So, those who don’t attend church want to know that Christianity is good, more than true.

Can our good works help improve the reputation of the Church? By establishing connections with the global community and ‘doing good’ through projects that help alleviate poverty, can we show that the Church is good? How would that help young adult churchgoers and non-churchgoers on their journey to belief? How can we demonstrate that the Canadian Church can play an important role in today’s culture?

# THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE



**In the midst of all the countless health and societal challenges brought on by the stark realities of COVID-19, the Canadian Church has also paid a price as we tried to respond faithfully and well to the pandemic.**

Every church and denomination in Canada has had to make quick, sharp pivots, prayerfully strategizing how best to continue ministering to their own congregations while also reaching out and meeting the needs of their communities. Most Canadian churches shifted to online worship in response to public health regulations, and others dramatically reduced in-person attendance. Church attenders who might have been attending only sporadically and already sitting on the fence about the role of the church in their lives might allow church to slip out of their lives completely as they build a new set of post-COVID lifestyle habits. The availability of a wider variety of online worship options meant that virtual “church shopping” was easier than ever, and it is possible that some people who return to church might attend a different church than before.

“Will people come back?” is one of the questions our World Vision Church Engagement Advisors

## **CONSIDER:**

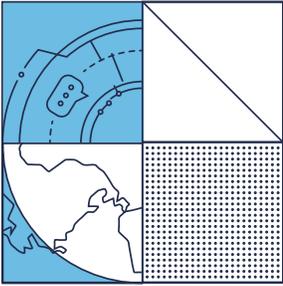
**Is there anything we need to do differently in our churches to encourage young adults to return to church after COVID-19?**

are hearing pastors and ministry leaders ask. “How will the Church recover from COVID-19?” is another.

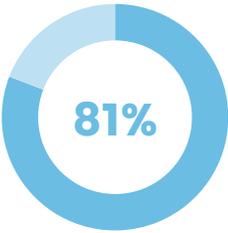
Of those who stopped attending church during the pandemic, 2021 data suggests 22% feel they will “definitely return” after COVID-19, with more than 40% sharing they will most likely return. For those who attended less during the pandemic, **1 in 5 say they were already losing interest in the Church** before the pandemic hit Canada.

Clearly, Canadian churches will continue to see changes in attendance patterns within this cohort in the months and years to come, especially as churches regather and reshape after the pandemic. The openness of a significant number of Canadian young adults attending church again is an opportunity for the Church to meet the needs we can now identify more clearly in this generation. The Church has an important role to play for those 7 out of 10 Christians who shared that they find it difficult to be a person of faith in today’s culture, and also for the 55% of Christians who say they feel discriminated against. In this research, young Canadian adults shared that they struggle daily with anxiety and loneliness. The Church can help.

How can the Church re-engage congregations and re-establish habits of attending, particularly for this cohort? This is a question with so many possible creative solutions. Potential solutions include creating opportunities for social engagement with peers, and facilitating opportunities for this generation to contribute through the social activism they have stated they want to engage in. Another solution may be to give this cohort opportunities to demonstrate strong leadership in a world that they identify as deficient in this area.



# POTENTIAL FOR IMPACT



**81%**  
OF YOUNG CANADIANS  
AGREE THAT OUR SOCIETY  
IS FACING A LEADERSHIP  
CRISIS.

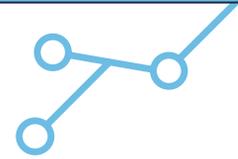


**1-in-3**  
MILLENNIALS HAVE NEVER  
FELT LIKE A LEADER OR  
CAN'T SAY WHERE THEY  
WOULD LEAD.

## We now have solid insights into the minds and hearts of the “Connected Generation.”

For many of us, what we likely already suspected to be true has been confirmed: being digitally connected does not make young adults feel any less alone. Anxiety is a rampant reality for many. And the Canadian Church has a reputation problem among a generation to whom the Church could offer so much: deep community connections, inter-generational relationships, a platform for doing the good in society they yearn to do, along with greater meaning and stability in their lives.

Concerns about leadership ran deep in responses to the survey. In Canada, **81% of respondents agreed that our society is facing a crisis in leadership, and a deficit of good leaders.** They are clear about the issues that matter the most to them in 2021, all of which require strong leadership: climate change (40%), racism (39%), pollution (30%), corruption (29%) and extreme poverty (28%). The most recent data revealed



that more than half (51%) of Canadian respondents shared that their personal beliefs motivates their concern about the welfare of others, and 43% said that their beliefs inspire them to give their money and resources to help others. Sadly, **only 31% of Canadians said they have someone who believes in them.**

This is a generation that is clearly engaged, or hoping to be, in making a difference in the world. They want to make the world a better place, and they have incredible talents and leadership skills to help make that happen. There is so much beautiful overlap between the desires and needs of 18-35 year-old Canadians and what the Church could offer them, even with all its imperfections. The Church has so much to gain from the gifts, insights, experiences and leadership of the Connected Generation. How could we not try to make a connection?

## CONSIDER:

To draw in this generation, the Church must demonstrate that we are leaders in making an impact on the world. This means a genuine posture of action and caring on issues like social justice, gender equality and racial justice, then telling our story of caring better. What are some practical and tangible ways that the Church can show we have impact in these areas?



# CONNECTING WITH THE CONNECTED: NEXT STEPS

**A clear picture emerges from these 16,000+ interviews with young adults in 25 countries (with over 1,000 of them in Canada).**

- We see a generation that is extremely connected and yet lonely and anxious; they are open to the idea of spiritual realities and also refreshingly open also to churches who align with their deep desire to make the world a better place.
- They call out weak leadership when they see it, and they expect more and better from leaders working on issues like climate change, racism and poverty, which they identify as urgently important.
- Many of them have not yet had the opportunity to lead for themselves.
- They long for community and connectivity.
- Making a difference matters to them.

During this research, we asked, we listened and we learned from this generation. At World Vision, we are also asking hard but good questions. How can we transform our Christian organization into a better workplace for this generation to build meaningful careers that will impact the world for the better? How can we engage young adults to partner with us in our mission to help vulnerable girls and boys reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice? The two waves of this survey, one in 2019 and again in 2021, provide significant insights into how we can improve our approaches to connecting with the Connected Generation. Clearly, we need to talk less and listen more, and we need to acknowledge and challenge our own assumptions about 18-35 year-olds. Then, we must ask ourselves, “How can we be the Church together?”

## World Vision Resources to help equip your next steps.

Download the full **The Connected Generation Canadian report** at [wvc.ca/the-connected-generation](http://wvc.ca/the-connected-generation).

As you consider expanding the social justice portfolio of your church, consider tapping into the work of Canadian charities that serve overseas. You can demonstrate your care and action as a church that cares about poverty, global issues, climate change, and gender equality by partnering with globally focused, Canadian-based charities.

## Ways to Engage

[CHOSEN & Child Sponsorship](#)

[Global 6K](#)

[30-Hour Famine](#)

[Matthew 25](#)