

What Youth Say About Relationships in Faith Communities

A Preliminary Report of
Study Findings from Shir
Tikvah Congregation

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Introduction to the Study

Exploring faith-nurturing relationships through diverse congregations

This 18-month qualitative study funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. explores the relational experiences of young people, parenting adults, and community leaders in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities. During focus groups and interviews, participants described relationships in their faith communities in the greater areas of Minneapolis, Minnesota and Charlotte, North Carolina. Through their eyes, the study brings fresh perspectives to how congregations nurture faith through a web of relationships.

“This is a place where I can always feel safe.”
-Shir Tikvah youth focus group participant

Congregations of many faiths are uniquely situated to cultivate multiple, diverse relationships that nurture young people’s lives, faith, and sense of vocation. Not only do they have the opportunity to form community among their members, they are also unique spaces where authentic, transformative relationships can occur across generations. Young people in this study shared how relationships in their faith communities were supportive, empowering, and most of all, developmental in nature. They described how relationships strengthen their faith through modeling, encouragement, and shared opportunities to lead.

In this preliminary report of findings, we share initial themes from the analysis of youth focus groups across all sites and faith traditions. In addition, we include suggestions from the young people who participated in focus groups at Shir Tikvah on how to best support and engage youth in this congregation. A final report of findings is set for release in the winter of 2020.

Themes of Faith and Relationships

The following themes are a selection of key takeaways expressed by young people across congregations that participated in the study.

Young people experience developmental relationships in faith communities

The ways in which young people experience relationships in faith communities paralleled elements of what Search Institute calls “developmental relationships,” through which they discover who they are, develop abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. When young people are experiencing developmental relationships, do better on an array of academic, social-emotional, behavioral and psychological indicators (Pekel et al., 2015; 2018, Scales et. al., 2019). [Search Institute has identified five critical elements of developmental relationships:](#)

- **Express Care:** show me that I matter to you.
- **Challenge Growth:** push me to keep getting better.
- **Provide Support:** help me complete tasks and goals.
- **Share Power:** treat me with respect and give me a say.
- **Expand Possibilities:** connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Search has conducted a wide array of studies across different contexts to study how young people experience developmental relationships including families, schools, after-school programs, leadership camps, outdoor education, and mentoring relationships. This study is the first of its kind to look at developmental relationships in faith communities. The following section highlights examples of how youth experienced the five elements of developmental relationships in this study.

Express Care:

Young people described how adults and peers in their faith communities expressed care to them when they were dependable, happy to see and spend time with them, encouraged them, and listened to what they had to say. When describing how someone

showed care to them, one participant noted, “He’s always lifting me up, instead of pulling me down.”

Challenge Growth:

When adults and peers had high expectations for young people, they experienced accountability to go further in their lives or faith. One participant described this as “always pushing me to be a better person,” while another described how they were encouraged to “be deeper in our faith.”

Provide Support:

Young people were appreciative when adults and peers helped them navigate questions of how to “handle the world,” particularly when faced with confusion or curiosity about their faith. One young person said, “If I have a question...something I really didn’t understand, they go deeper into it...they reassure me and they make sure they understand me.”

Share Power:

It was empowering for young people to feel as though they were not a passive actor in their walk of faith or the activities and worship in the community. As one young person noted, “I always feel like my opinion is being considered.” They described how adults shared power by collaborating with them, including them in decisions that affected them, or letting them take the lead. Young people were given a variety of opportunities to lead, including mentoring younger members, leading portions of worship, or helping to decide how a youth group budget was allocated.

Expand Possibilities:

Faith communities can open up new possibilities and opportunities for young people. Participants described how they were invited to travel to new places, join new activities, or connect with others who could help them. One young person discussed how adults expand possibilities for them: “....they ask me and they want me to do these new opportunities and new ideas that are happening...and they’re like, ‘I feel like you’d be great!’”

Young people experience positive outcomes when given the opportunity to lead

Participants were excited to share how they are a leader in their faith communities and what these experiences mean to them. As one young person said, “...you’re helping someone grow in their relationship with God.” Young people discussed that when given the opportunity to lead, make decisions, or collaborate with others, they were more likely to show up, dig deeper into sacred texts, or be excited to participate. Leadership allows worship and activities to be more “interesting” and “personal,” and young people feel more invested in the experience.

Across the sites and faith traditions that participated in this study, youth were provided a variety of opportunities for shared leadership:

- Volunteering alongside people of all ages
- Worship: ushering, reading sacred texts, contributing to music
- Faith-based camp: being a camp counselor, helping with events
- Teaching and tutoring
- Leading as a member of an executive board or council
- Designing and executing events and activities

Participating as a leader also offered a chance to meet new people in the community and build relationships of all ages. “I’ve formed relationships with people older than me,” shared one young person, “because I tend to be approached by adults to help with things.”

Other young people described how they would become closer with others and even develop friendships when working together on a project or activity. One young person said they “met several people and gotten to know them through playing songs” for worship. Working alongside others with similar passions or an interest in serving provided the space for relationships and bonds to form. Congregations are uniquely positioned to provide these leadership opportunities for young people that they may not experience in other areas of their lives.

Faith communities provide a unique space for young people to form relationships outside of their home and school

When asked to describe the people in their lives who had a positive relationship with them and had an impact on their faith, young people most commonly listed family members, yet many also included clergy and staff, camp counselors, and lay people of all ages within the faith community.

Interactions with these important people could be formal or informal in nature. Many young people described how easy it is to strike up a conversation around the church, mosque, or synagogue. Many people had also watched them grow throughout their time in the faith community, and had invested time in getting to know them.

Participants noted that they knew who to turn to in the community if they had concerns or questions. “Some people come for a reason and season,” noted one young person, sharing how people in the faith community were there when needed during tough times or crisis. The nature of the relationships that were formed were also influential in providing models for faith within the community. One young person admired “strong, empowered” people they saw as models of the faith, who had also helped guide them in understanding their faith.

Young people benefit from experiencing a web of caring relationships made up of family, friends, teachers, and mentors (Roehlkepartain, Pekel, Syvertsen, Sethi, Sullivan, & Scales, 2017). Congregations, being intergenerational, can provide unique opportunities for young people to broaden those webs of relationships.

Religious staff and lay people alike can arise as mentors, leaders, and supporters for young people. Their unique position in a faith community can help guide a young person as they explore their spiritual identity, invite them to participate, or simply be a friendly face that they can turn to if they need to talk.

Supporting and Engaging Young People at Shir Tikvah

“Adults would get along with teenagers or young adults as equals in a conversation or in a classroom and they’ll build relationships with us and talk with us, instead of to us. Which has really helped me realize how to make my own Judaism and still have these meaningful relationships.” –Shir Tikvah youth focus group participant

Suggestions from Youth

Increase interfaith opportunities

Youth said that opportunities for STiFTY to connect with youth groups from other faiths and religions would be a way Shir Tikvah could improve youth programming. They expressed a desire to move beyond their “tight-knit community” to learn about other traditions and share their own. One young person said that talking about their Jewish faith to non-Jews is “really empowering, because I get to talk about myself, and I think it’s cool to give them perspective on something they don’t have a lived experience in.”

Keep up the Good Work: Successes to Build on

Social justice work

Youth spoke about the importance of the social justice focus at Shir Tikvah: “Other synagogues are removed from social justice work. I think it’s literally in the mission statement here.” They spoke about social justice is a frame for their religious learning that helps them contextualize and apply what they are learning about in the Torah to their own lives.

Youth express that kids, more than “older grownups”, are “searching for current issues to solve, using Judaism and what it preaches and teaches.” One young person mentioned that members of the congregation participate in activism in the broader community, with congregants attending demonstrations and talking about issues together.

Concluding Thoughts

Our team at Search Institute would like to extend a sincere and heartfelt thank you to Shir Tikvah for partnering with us in this work. We greatly appreciate the efforts of Forrest Yesnes to help us coordinate and organize a successful focus group with young people. In addition, we are grateful for the time participants gave to share their thoughts and experiences. Their perspectives have helped shape the ways we think about the impact of relationships in young people's lives and the formation of their faith.

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