

A woman in a yellow dress stands on a rocky outcrop, looking out over a bay. In the background, a large, rugged mountain rises against a hazy sky. The foreground shows rolling green hills and a small beach. The overall scene is serene and scenic.

# United Methodist Communications Youth Research

October 2022

Aspen Finn 

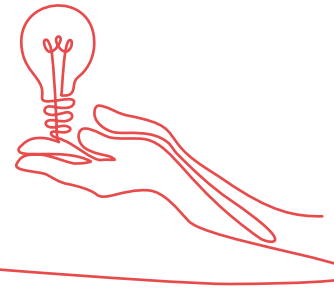


# Table of Contents



- Project Overview and Stages
- Executive Summary
- Respondent Snapshot
- Stakeholder Survey Highlights
- Commonalities and Contrasts
- Affiliated Additional Findings
- Unaffiliated Additional Findings
- Conclusions and Action Items

# Project Overview



## The Ask

As Americans' membership in houses of worship continue to decline (fewer than half say they belong to a church per Gallup), The United Methodist Church (UMC) has also felt the decrease in members. To stop the decline and start attracting new members, UMC believes that better understanding what younger members love—and what younger prospects want—will be crucial to their organization's future. To this end, this research will be designed to deep dive into the lives of both affiliated UMC youth and non-affiliated youth.

Results will be used to ensure the UMC is able to keep current members happily engaged and committed to the church's growth, as well as to provide the marketing team with the information they need to start attracting new congregants. An additional impetus to this research is the upcoming quadrennial youth event "BOLD" in 2023, for which marketing and communications for outreach and leadership is essential.

## The Audience

Aspen Finn led discussions with 19 affiliated and 22 unaffiliated young adults 15-22 years old. This age range includes milestone experiences such as high school, adulthood, college, and early household formation.



# Three-Step Research Approach

01

Stakeholder  
Survey

A questionnaire was distributed to UMC stakeholders to help shape discussions for the two youth segments. Items included generational contrasts, success stories and frustrations in engaging young adults, curiosities and unknowns, and ideals in attracting and retaining 15-22 year olds.

02

Affiliated  
Youth

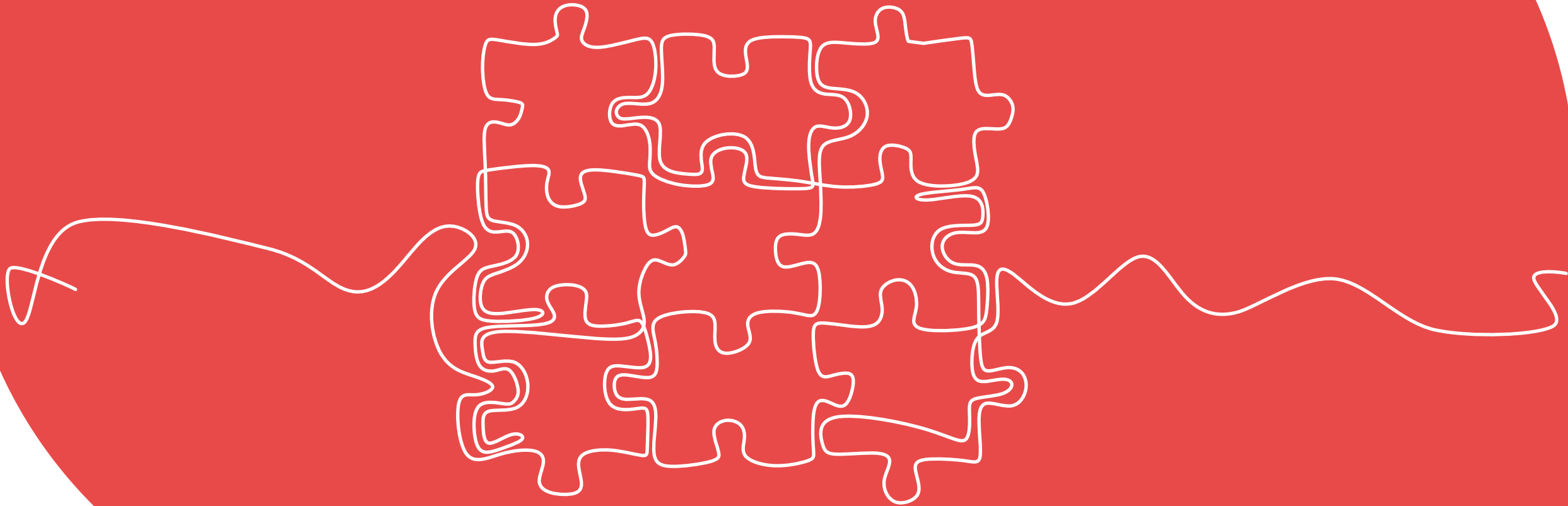
A three-day discussion board with affiliated youth explored their UMC origins; current interactions and thoughts about the church; personal values; perspectives on spirituality, God, religion, and faith; openness in sharing their views with others; and an exploration of truth, misinformation, and social media use.

03

Non-  
Affiliated  
Youth

Five focus groups were conducted with unaffiliated youth, exploring similar topics as with the affiliated youth board. Additionally, respondents discussed their spiritual journeys and what it might mean to “belong” to a church community.

# Executive Summary





# Executive Summary/Implications



01

Community = diversity

A community of variety and diversity is a more appealing ideal than one of sameness and similarities. Gen Z values diversity in everything, including communities of faith.

02

Acceptance above all

All respondents seek acceptance and expect it in a God-led environment. Those who have turned away from the church did so because either they did not feel embraced as a person, or detected judgment in others and opted out in disdain.

03

Truthfulness ≠ Truth

Respondents are suspicious of absolutes and criticize organizations that seem self-righteous. Gen Z claims truth to be among the greatest of their values but is reluctant to challenge others' truths or to abide in the idea of Absolute Truth.

04

Relationships of a third kind




Like the initial Gen Z research Aspen Finn conducted earlier this year for UMC, respondents consider the relationships they want or have for their spiritual journeys as not quite like friendships or immediate family: a third kind of relationship or a third type of relational space.

05

Practical Application

Respondents desire a spiritual life that is practical and applicable in addition to wise. They applaud church leaders who bring theology and Biblical views to life in vivid and relevant ways.

# Implications



## Adopt a new perspective on membership

Respondents see their lives as more fluid than in generations before them. Time poverty is not necessarily a deal breaker in considering membership. It's more about the idea of feeling community in many places, not just one. This applies to churches as well.

## Embrace diversity

Tomorrow's UMC young adults will look quite unlike the "classic" or "typical" UMC members. As reflected in everything from the U.S. Census through the pop culture landscape, the rising adult population will challenge many norms. They will also seek environments sparkling in variety vs. sameness.

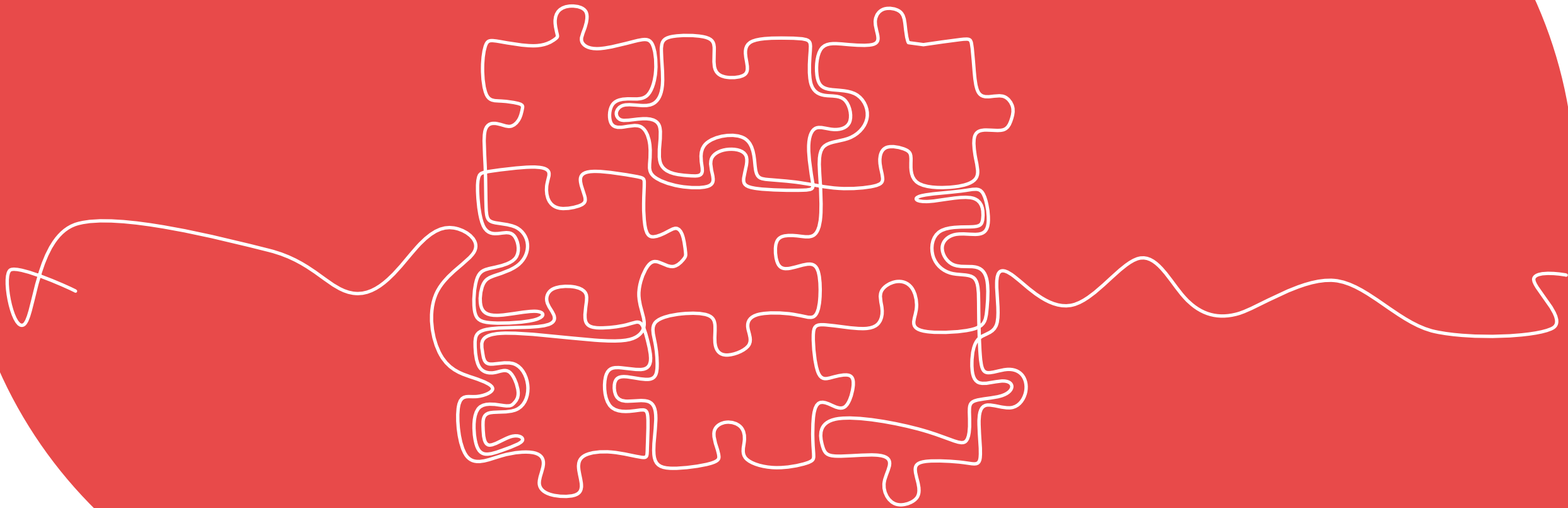
## Treat young adults as peers

Respondents feel more like observers and consumers vs. collaborators in the church (this applies to unaffiliated youth as well). Evaluate every function, gathering, ministry, and perhaps programming to include Gen Z as a major force.

## Lead with dialogue vs. definitiveness

With their deep curiosity, questioning, and insistence on diverse viewpoints, UMC can be an appealing forum. But Gen Z will disappear if they feel they're being "recruited" or manipulated, or if the church overemphasizes absolute truth.

# Respondent Snapshot

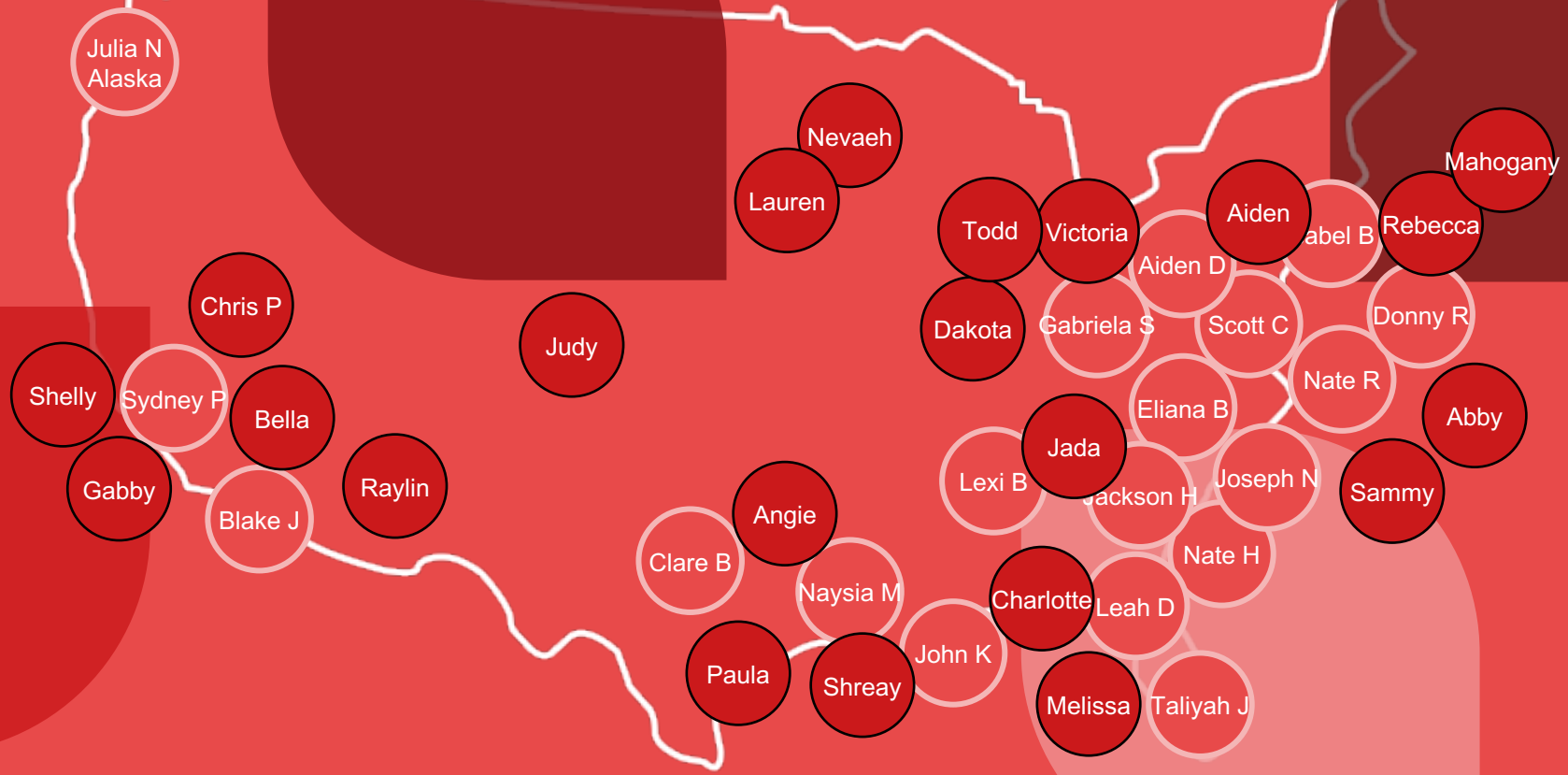




# The Respondents

○ Affiliated

● Unaffiliated



“Gen Z” | Gender mix (1 non-binary) | n=21 15-18; n=20 19-22 years old | Ethnic mix

# Faces from the research



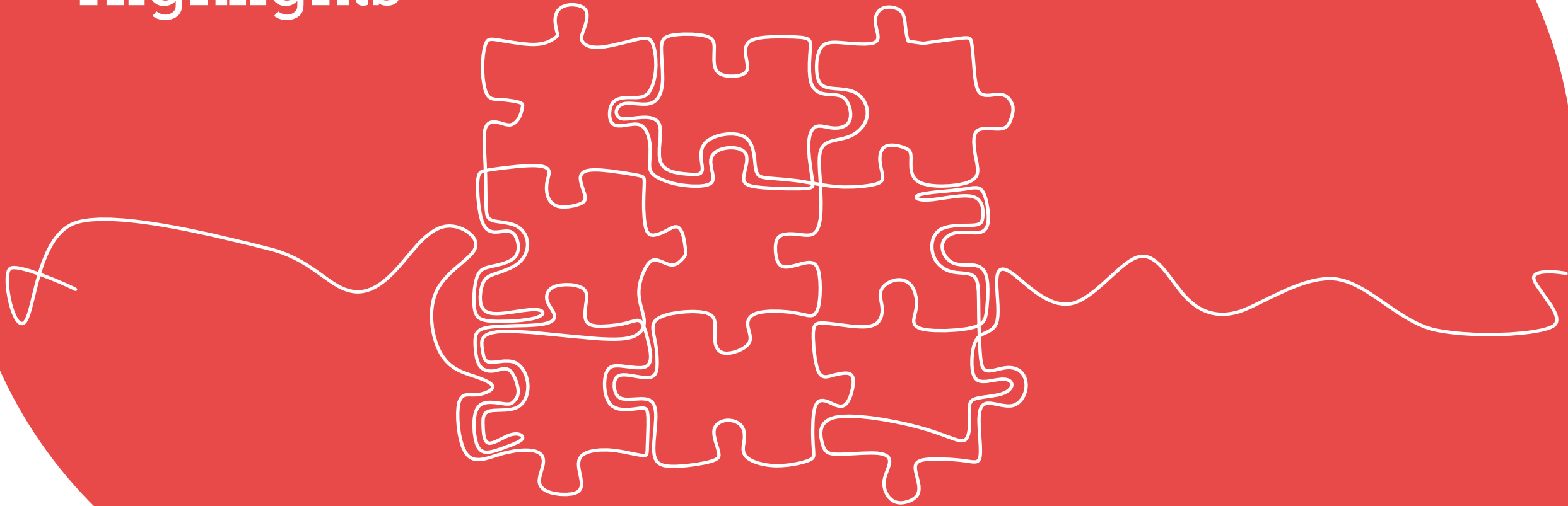
A sampling of **unaffiliated** respondents

(Photos of affiliated respondents were not required for participation. Those who uploaded images did so at very low image resolution and are blurry.)



# Stakeholder Survey Highlights

A refresher on key points and questions  
expressed prior to the field work with Gen Z



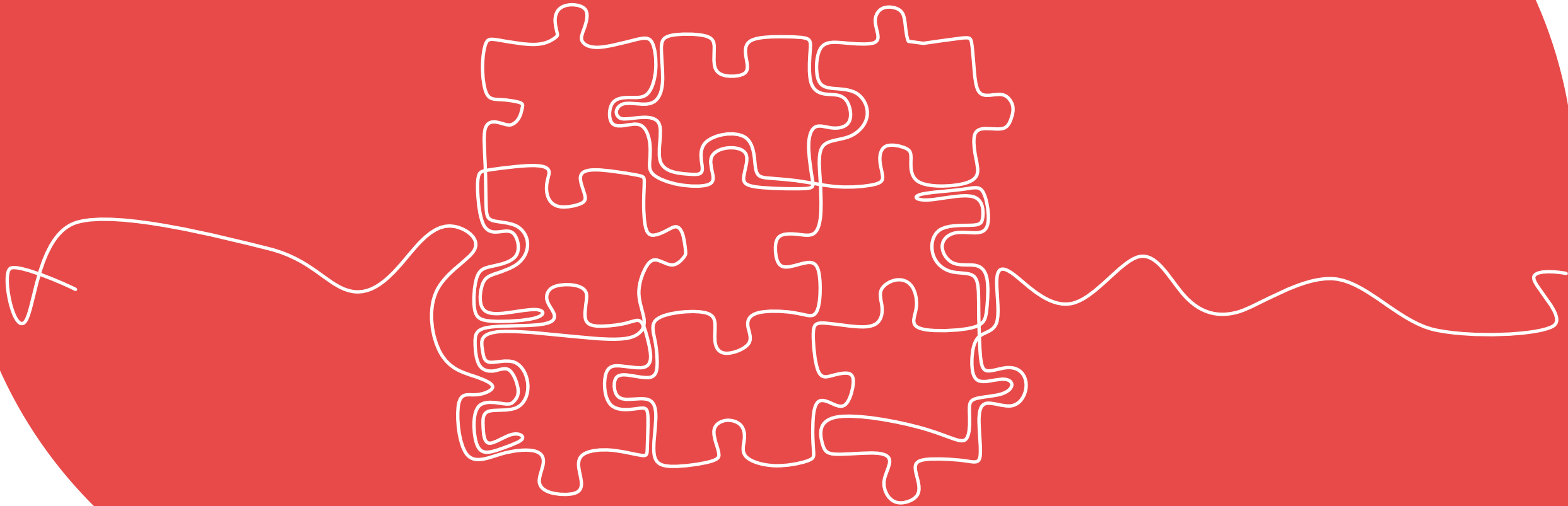
# Stakeholder Survey Highlights

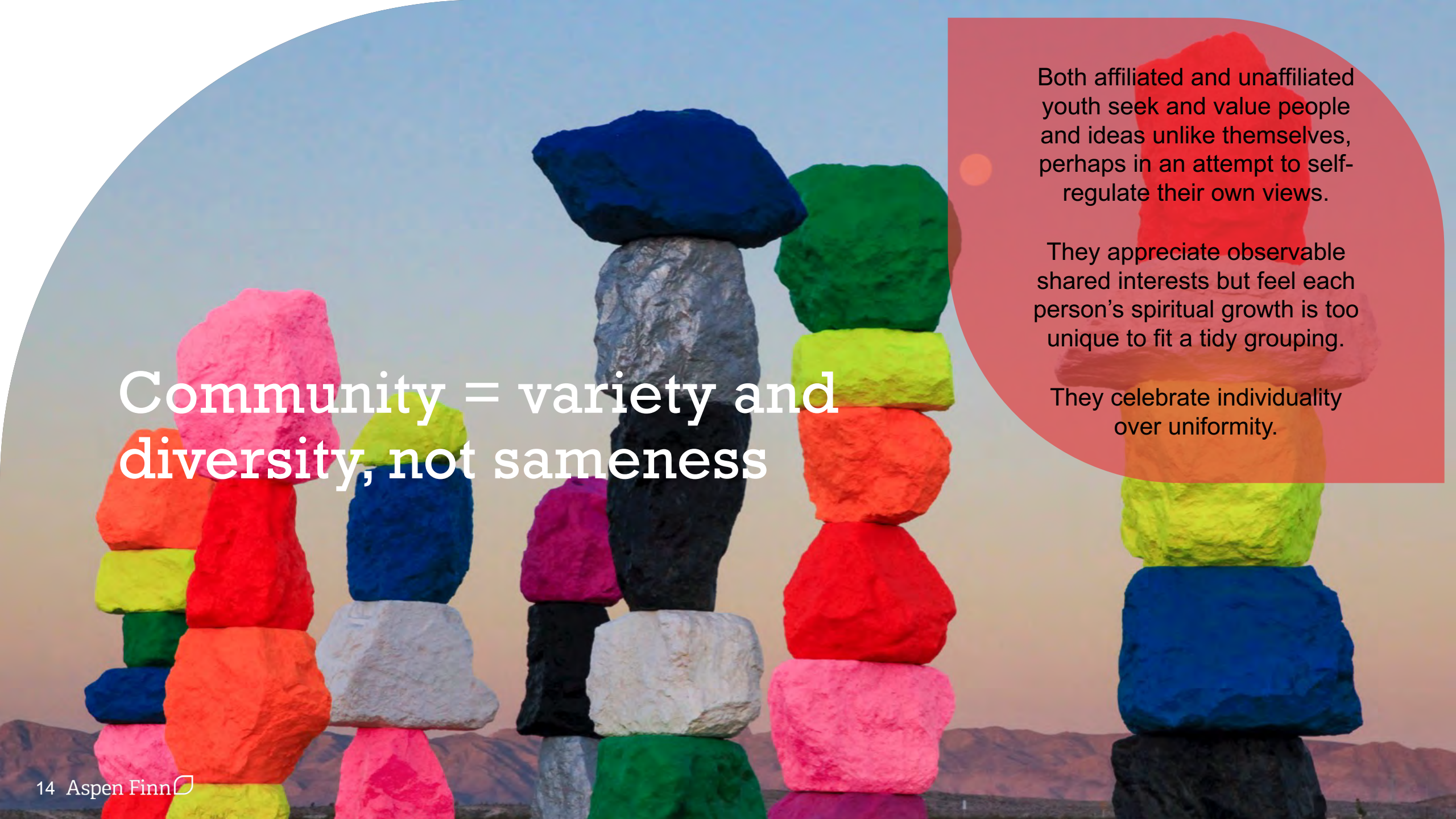
-  **Strong sense of individuality, values, and purpose**  
Stakeholders want to understand the relevance of the church in shaping and supporting Gen Z values.
-  **Adult ambitions, responsibility anxieties**  
How much guidance do youth want from the church?
-  **Who is God and what does He do?**  
What answers does Gen Z have to big questions like this?
-  **Social media influence and reliance**  
What's the right role of social media for the church? How do youth contribute, share, or learn via social media? What do youth want from social media?
-  **Truth and misinformation**  
Do youth see the church as a credible source of information?
-  **Agency within the church**  
Do youth feel as if they can meaningfully contribute or will be heard?
-  **Relevance of the church**  
What do they need for something to feel relevant?
-  **Resistance to institutions**  
How much resistance and why?
- 
- 



# Commonalities and Contrasts

Views that affiliated and unaffiliated youth share  
and some subtle ways they differ





# Community = variety and diversity, not sameness

Both affiliated and unaffiliated youth seek and value people and ideas unlike themselves, perhaps in an attempt to self-regulate their own views.

They appreciate observable shared interests but feel each person's spiritual growth is too unique to fit a tidy grouping.

They celebrate individuality over uniformity.



A row of seven autumn leaves hanging from a string, showing a color gradient from green to red. The leaves are arranged in a slightly curved line, with the colors transitioning from green on the left to red on the right. The background is a light, neutral color.

Some truth is still truth

Both affiliated and non-affiliated respondents equate truth with honesty and “personal truths” vs. as a complete, ineffable whole.

# Relationships take time

## Years of investment in self and others

Willing to invest, but facing a structure that doesn't acknowledge the volatility, uncertainty, and speed of each person's spiritual journey.

Don't feel as if they can pop in and out of church environment easily.

Relationships and familiarity with each other that developed over the years are the advantages affiliated youth have that dissuade non-affiliated youth from approaching the church



## Introduced as a Baby

Both affiliated and non-affiliated youth were introduced to the church when they were very young. Most, including those who left the church, value the relationships established there.





# Acceptance above all

The church should be ok with my changes as I achieve adulthood and mature as a person.

Both affiliated and non-affiliated youth prioritize acceptance as a tenet of Christian community and reject or leave church communities that do not demonstrate acceptance.

*“I definitely believe in a radically progressive Brown Jesus and that has wholly influenced my rethinking of religion and of the church as a whole. Jesus loved everyone, even those who were hard to love or who were ostracized from their community and I really admire that.”*  
– Isabel B, affiliated

God is omnipresent but  
personal for only a few.  
Most youth are omnistic.

*Omnism is not compatible with  
Christianity. In a sense,  
omnism is very similar to  
pluralism. Pluralism teaches all  
religions are acceptable and  
compatible with one another.  
Omnism also teaches that it is  
fine to believe in all religions  
because they have an element  
of truth in them. –  
Christianity.com*



# Slightly Different Values and Interests

## Affiliated Youth

Politics and social justice,  
equality for all

Leadership skills

Courage to fight for beliefs

Determination

Respect for others

Loves losing track of time  
exploring new things

Curiosity

"Values" and "spirituality"  
are not the same

## Non-Affiliated Youth

Kindness

Mutual respect


Family

Self-care, self-respect

Lack of judgment

Trust, openness

"Values" and "spirituality"  
are more interconnected



*"I value people who have unwavering trust in other people, those who are not afraid to fight for what they believe in, and people who are strong-willed and determined." – Clare B, affiliated*

*"I value trust, community support, social confidence, and willingness to try new things and experiment." – Nate R, affiliated*

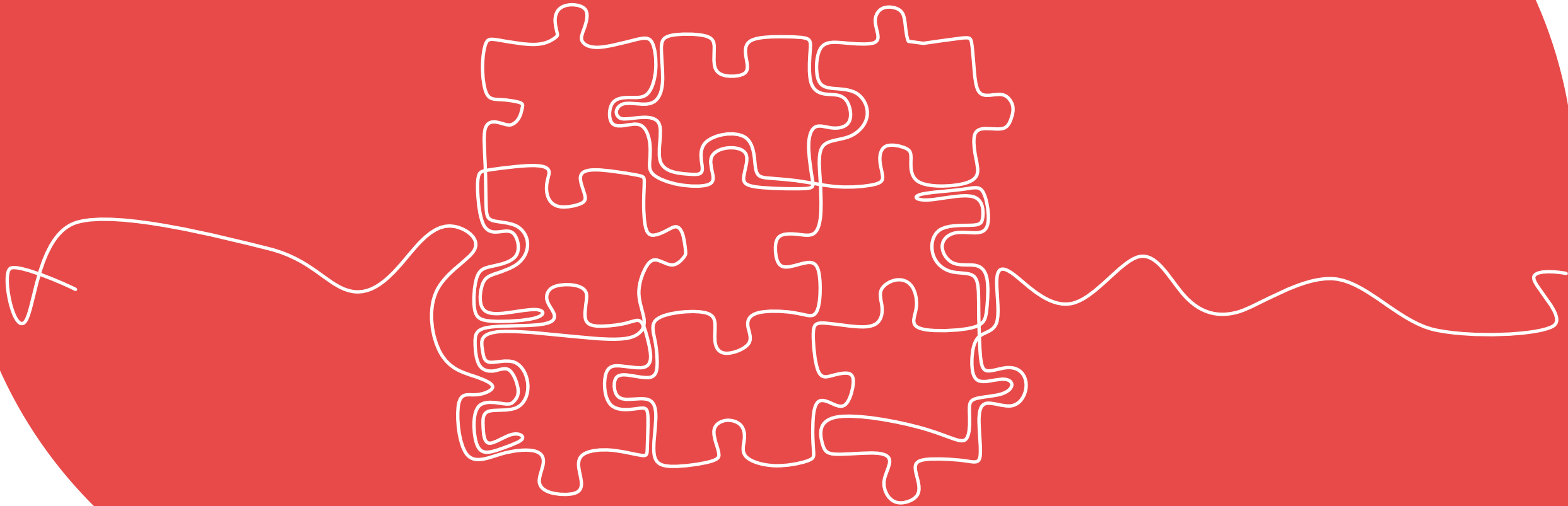
*"Snap judgments are not always accurate." – Lauren, unaffiliated*

*"Respecting anyone, no matter what their, um, identities are or who they are is very important for me and my family." – Abby, unaffiliated*



# Affiliated Youth

## Additional Findings





# Spirituality and Values

Affiliated Youth see values and spirituality as being two different but important concepts.

They see spirituality more lesson-oriented vs. values are driven more by “gut” and personal experience.

Somewhat more confident in their spiritual journeys, and are more open to others’ perspectives that may challenge personal values.

They remind us that despite the contrasts, both values and spiritual growth happens both inside and beyond the church.

*“Spirituality can inform values but I think they should be separate from each other. I think if we are told how to be a certain way as opposed to coming to the conclusion ourselves, it can lead to a slippery slope in other facets of life.” – Isabel B*

*“They are different because it truly depends on how spiritual you are. You can not be spiritual and have good values while the most spiritual person you can ever meet can have the worst values ever in life.” – Naysia M*

*“Spirituality heavily influences my values, but my spirituality is not based solely on my values. Spirituality is a part of who I am...My values will change over time with experiences.” – Jackson H*





# God and UMC

## Different roles for God and UMC

Perceive that church community is generally much older. Desire to have more peers/people their own age.

UMC not always accepting, but God always is.

- Confessions of "filtering" self
- Perceptions that church environment does not promote revelation of whole self
- More conservative, formal than real life
- Not always comfortable sharing intimate issues with church leaders (especially sexuality, social equality)
- Open to sharing goals and aims with leaders

*"The Role of the Church was to give me a gentle guiding hand for life, and what I need to know and remember from the Bible. God has had a different role. He is someone I can look to for answers that no one else would have. He has been there for every trial I have had in my life and He will continue to be there for me forever." – Eliana B*

*"I think church has always been a place that I've been able to be myself and feel loved. It hasn't always been an easy journey as the UMC has become a place of hostility in some areas because of their lack of acceptance for everyone who wants to be involved with the church." – Isabel B*

*"I feel like the church is more of a communal where I can worship and serve God, while my relationship with God is my progress in my faith. Whether is prayer, meditation, or reading the Bible." – Clare B*

*"I have to wear the pretty dresses and have my nails painted and my hair down. I have to behave like a nice, straight female. That is not who I am. I am a woman who loves other women. I live in a small southern town, so I am use to hiding. But it is sad that I have to hide around people who are supposed to love everyone unconditionally." – Lexi B*

*"I don't often go to church because I don't feel comfortable." – Gabriela S*





# Who is God and what does He do?

*“There are different ways that people experience the divinity that we call God.” – Nate R*

**All religions are valid and should be valued. Affiliated youth have similar views as unaffiliated youth, despite their current associations with UMC.**

- God is everywhere in everything
- God helps when we need. He is a safety net.
- God is tuned into the here and now, but the church isn't
- Accepts everyone (so why can't the church?)
- Most monotheistic, but with some parallels to omnism.

# Leadership and UMC

## Experiential benefit among affiliated

Affiliated youth were enthusiastic about their leadership experiences with the church, citing a variety of activities, responsibilities, and groups.

**They seem to have a heart for “younger people.”**

## Not on unaffiliated’s radar

Acknowledging that a leadership discussion was not built into the focus groups, it is worth noting that none of the unaffiliated youth equated church community with leadership development – especially when recalling that like affiliated youth, these respondents were introduced to church at a very young age..

*“The church as in the church camp I worked at showed me how to speak in front of people and be a better leader.”*  
– Lexi B

*“The benefit of having the community of the church is that you have experienced older Christians that not only care about you but want you to succeed.”* – John K

*“The church has helped me develop leadership skills that I’ve used almost everyday.”* – Joseph N

*“The church has been really beneficial in my educational goals offering grants and connected me with several people in the field I am interested in.”*  
– Isabel B

# Pressing Concerns

Among Affiliated Youth



Hatefulness and lack of acceptance

Homelessness, food and housing insecurity

Climate change



Access to health care

Greed and resultant corruption





# Strong preference for in-person engagement



Affiliated's most recent fond memory of a church activity invited deep conversations, hands-on responsibilities, and unfamiliar scenarios.

When asked to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of online gatherings, affiliateds far prefer connecting offline.



*"I prefer it in person that way it feels more connected and genuine."* – Jackson H

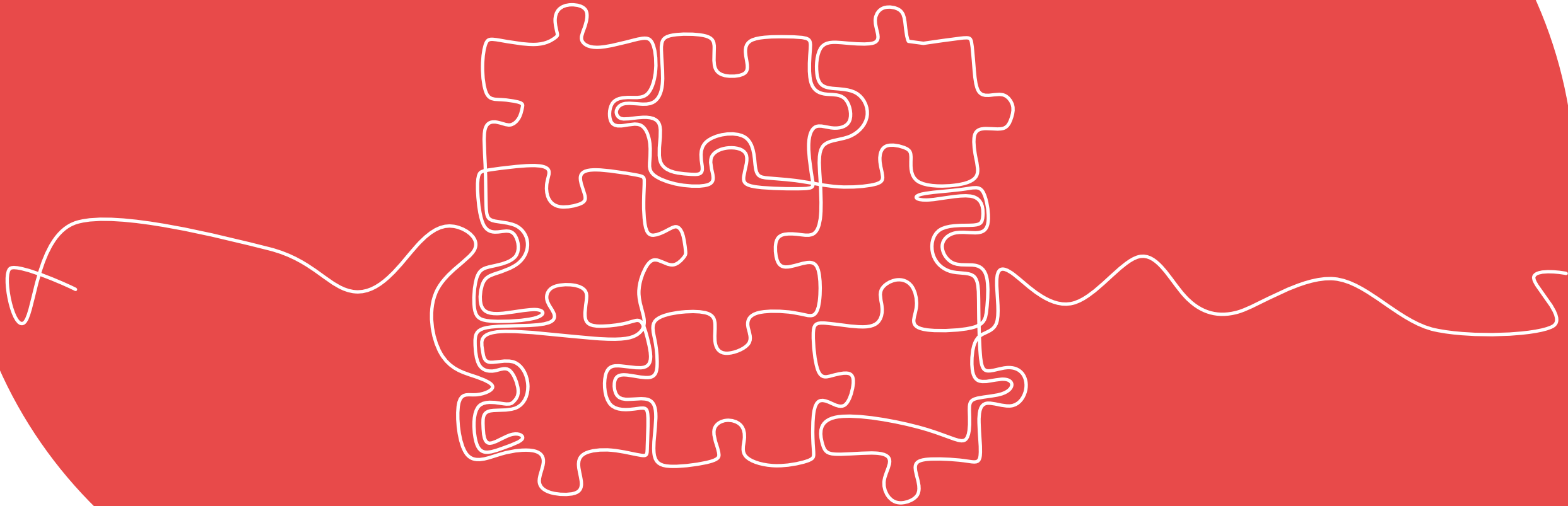


*"In-person because you can get into much more deeper conversation than online."* – Joseph N



# Unaffiliated Youth

Additional Findings



# Characteristics of Unaffiliated Youth

## Comfort seeking

Whether due to the stress of the world, their status in life, or simply as a hallmark of their generation, unaffiliated youth tend to find and stick to people and places that feel good, are familiar, or promise comfort.

## Deep thinkers

With all due respect to the attention given to find respondents who were willing to talk about faith and spirituality, the respondents expressed a remarkable interest, experience, and thoughtfulness in weighty matters. They also value wisdom in others.

## Conflict averse

They seem to be riddled with inner conflict already and don't want to engage in a way that deepens that conflict.

*"I feel like the last, you know, few years of like hectic world really just like made everyone take a second and realize that like, everything is weird and we can just be nice." – Lauren*

*"I think about how I act at work...I just think about how crazy life can be...my life is about being kind." – Raylin*

*"I surround myself with a lot of good people, a lot of good friends, and I feel like that has an impact on the way that I am." – Gabby*

## Top values are kindness, respect for others, and honesty

Seen as a sharp contrast from their forebears, a chaotic world makes them want to "care equally about each other," but fear vulnerability or being taken advantage of.

## Respect for self also a priority

They are attentive to self-care, mindfulness, mental health, and avoidance of anything detrimental to these things. In one or two cases, this includes separating from family members if necessary.

## Reject judgment, absolutes

There are few greater concerns and aversions than the idea that there's a best kind of personhood other than the one each of us is capable of.



# Who is God and what does He do?

*"I feel like [spirituality] is a baseline...it's like a recommendation, I guess, in a way. Like you could look at this to help gain more knowledge, but I don't think you necessarily need to obtain that same knowledge, like you get it from somewhere else too." – Todd*

*"I can believe in a higher being without a specific meaning or like a book to assign to it." – Bella*

**All religions are valid and should be valued. Unaffiliated youth don't want to hear they're wrong or can't fit into God's view.**

- God is everywhere in everything
- God helps when we need. He is a safety net.
- God is tuned into the here and now, but the church isn't
- Accepts everyone (so why can't the church?)
- Some view monotheistically, most omnist or pluralistic.

*"I feel like in its basic form, religion is kind of like a prescription for your wellbeing and like basically to give you a set of values to lead your life with like, um, I think Judy said something about the whole tattooing thing. I read somewhere that like the whole tattooing thing was because back then tattoos were like really harmful to yourself. So they basically included it so that people don't like harm themselves with this tattooing thing. And probably the whole principle behind that would be different today. Now that we have like better ways of tattooing." – Shreay*



# Spirituality

## Nice to have, but not need to have

*"I think it's really comforting to people. If people are nervous about the future or need to feel a sense of community. I definitely think that religion and spirituality provide a lot of comfort in those areas." – Sammy*

## Sincere searching, but very privately

*"I think about [spirituality, religion] all the time. I feel like sometimes there's things that happen and I'm just like, there's no way that this is just a coincidence or like, you know what I mean? It's just, it's in the back of my head, but I just feel like there's no proof or anything. And that's really hard for me. Like the fact that all these different religions are out and everything and everybody has their own way of practicing." – Paula*

## Interested in knowledge and practical application

*"I want to understand what [the Bible] means rather than just saying it from the book." – Todd*



# Spirituality

## continued

### **Spiritual self “motivates you to do better things.”**

*“I think spirituality is like connecting with the energy and things around you. I go in deeper and go with like ancestors and all of that type of stuff.” – Victoria*

*“I personally think that spirituality is ... a way of searching for answers kind of within yourself, but also within the world around you. ...a way to see the world around you and to better your perspective of the world around you and how you're living.” – Charlotte*

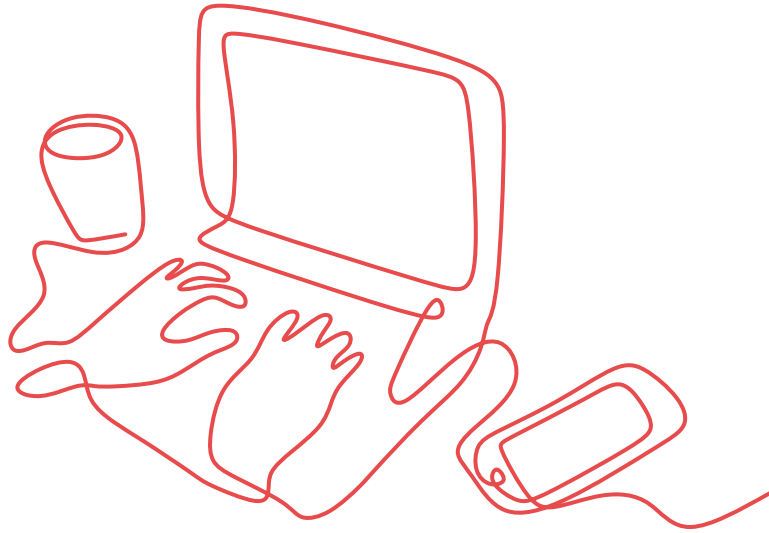
### **Church is not required**

*“I love camping and backpacking and all the things outside that makes me feel like so connected to like some greater thing more than like going to church ever did.” – Lauren*

*“I don't really believe in anything, but I think that if there was a higher being of some sort that wouldn't change the way that I live.” – Rebecca*

*“Ultimately I would prefer not to go to church. I don't mind it, but I personally don't like having somebody telling me how I'm supposed to live my life.” – Victoria*





# Social Media is for Entertainment, Not Important Views

Unaffiliated youth have absolutely no interest in posting spirituality, religious views on social media. They feel social media has changed so much that the next generation will have bigger struggles.

- Invites argument
- Emboldens confirmation bias
- Social media not good for mental health, self-image
- Divisive
- Connotes disrespect of others
- Others aren't truthful so it's not a reliable platform for truth
- Social media is for entertainment, leisure, silliness

*"If you wanna have a real discussion, then you shouldn't be on social media." – Shreay*

*"I rely on social media for mainly entertainment and kind of a way that just like escape, everything." – Chris P*

*"If I was 14 and on TikTok, now that would've ruined my self-esteem, it would've been really bad for me." – Bella*

*"I come across a lot of combative people and I just rather just not go through, you know, having to argue about what I believe." – Jada*

# Appealing aspects of the church among unaffiliated youth

“

*“The church is a place where I can just like be myself and talk to like the old ladies who have known me since I was like a week old... But as I've moved away from home, I have struggled to kind of bridge the gap between being open to a different kind of church community.” – Angela*

*“Growing up one of the main things that drew me to church was just a state of calmness and just peace and quiet...But one thing [that repels] is not really being able to speak...You have to kind of just sit there and listen.” – Chris*



Childhood nostalgia, warm memories of church as a child, like comfort food

Presence of long-standing relationships



Acknowledgement of the church as an important part of communities, especially for those who are impoverished or in crisis



Fundamental support for UMC's aim to make the world a better place – but feel all of Christianity, and all denominations in organized mainstream religions, should focus on making the world a better place.

# Criticisms about Christianity/the church



*“There’s a lot of bad actors in religion.”*

– Bella

*“Others use Christianity as kind of a cop out, in some ways, for their hate.”*

– Angela

*“It doesn’t make sense how you can say like, love one another and love everybody, but then not accept gay marriage and stuff like that.”*

*“Like, I’m not too heavy on the details, but I know missionaries, back in the 16, 17 hundreds, they would, they would definitely use violence as a way to get their point across.”*

*“I feel [religion] should pay more attention to bettering people’s lives instead of looking into them and trying to change them.”*

Church membership = recruiting. They don’t want to feel recruited.

Cynical that churches say more than they do (e.g. make the world a better place).

Disconnect between what is claimed as truth but actions, behavior are misaligned.

Churches are disconnected from, or dismissive of, current issues.

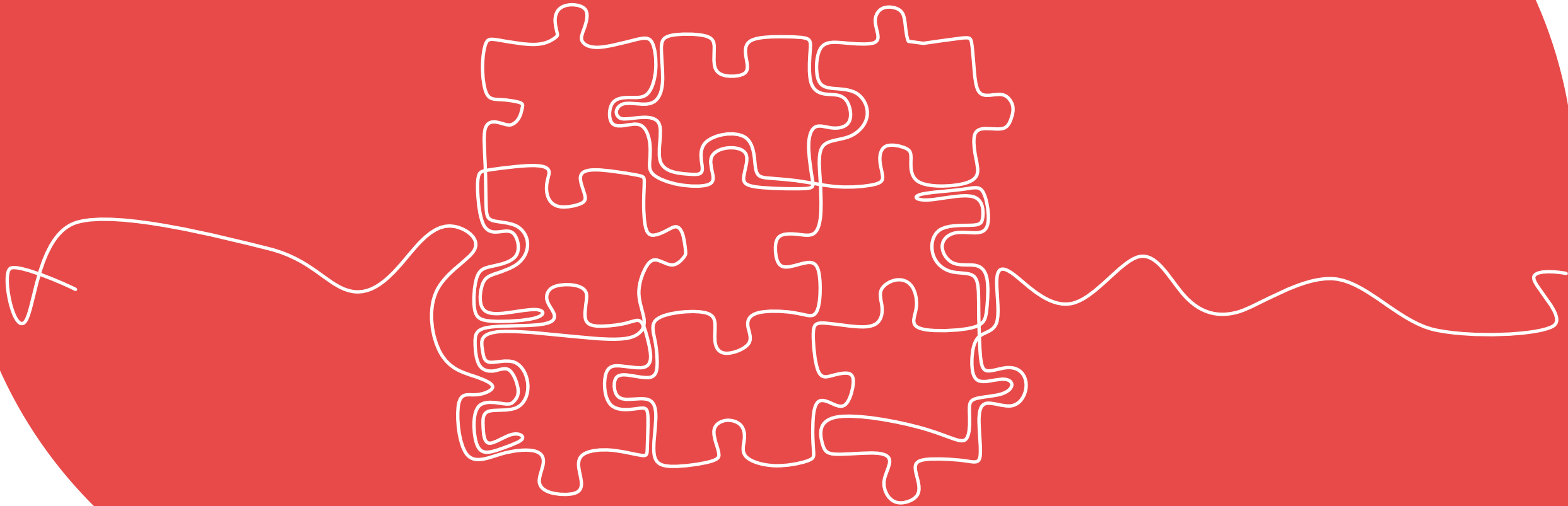
Churches distort or misinterpret God’s intentions.

Human frailty, corruption, sin as evident among church goers as non-churchgoers.



# Conclusions and Action Items

Including Messaging Recommendations



# Steps to draw non-affiliated to UMC

01

## Emphasize the familiar

Be warm, fuzzy, embracing...

02

## De-emphasize the unknown

Avoid promises such as “friends for life.”

03

## No FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)

Avoid portraying UMC as a place only for certain people or certain occasions.

04

## Communicate practical knowledge

Demonstrate God’s relevance and application in real life, real situations.

05

## Avoid “recruiting”

They don’t feel they need to “sign up” to feel they belong.

06

## Celebrate the “body” as in 1 Cor 12

Emphasize how each as individuals helps to make a whole, and that the body of Christ relies on each of our gifts and strengths.

07

## Use social media as a calendar

Communicate events, activities vs. deep dialogue.

08

## Emphasize real-world opportunities

Even the unaffiliated like to know, and sometimes participate in, projects that have direct outcomes.

# “Dear UMC...”

A collection of comments from affiliated youth

## Inclusion in important matters

“Something I’ve said for years has been that Youth/the young people of the Church are the future so their needs to be more representation of younger church members when making church policy.” – Joseph N

## Unconditional Acceptance

“I wish the church knew that everyone has different values and beliefs and that we should all learn to respect them all. We’re taught to respect and love one another and I believe that some thing we should truly do.” – Leah D

“Please listen to the voices of your youth.” – Taliyah D

“The one thing I think the church needs to hear is that to love your neighbor you must accept them for who they are. It does matter if they are of a different race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. If the greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself, then I urge the Methodist church to keep this in mind as they decided the future of the church.” – Clare B

## Embrace Diversity

“Open the doors wide, flip the tables, and let all hearts worship. Love as they are called.” – Nate R



# “Dear UMC...”

A collection of comments from unaffiliated youth

## Celebrate common values

“I would want to be vulnerable with people who are understanding, like not really judgy and just acceptance accepting of me and like other people as well.” – Raylin

## Immediate Acceptance

“I would want to know that like I, myself, who I am, where I come from, people that other people that look like me that don't look like me are going to be accepted.” – Mahogany

## Support System

“The whole idea of having like a church home kind of like a central place, it's just really like moving to see the way people act in church. You can just tell when people are like really, really relying on this...you could tell there's something happening in their life and the way that they rely on religion to kind of get them through that...I think it's really special.” – Judy

## Diverse angles

“I think it's also really important to be aware with what else is going on around the world, not just with like news and current events, but just seeing other lifestyles and other, um, other perspectives on the world and how other people live.” – Charlotte

# Action Items

Potential messages for Gen Z



Similar values, diverse viewpoints

The family you choose

A community of diversity

Growth without contentiousness





A scenic view of a mountain valley with a large tree in the foreground and two people on a rock ledge.

Thank you

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