

# IMAGINATIVE HOPE

Reaching and Engaging the  
Next Generation with the Gospel

*A Report from the 2016  
Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Forum*





THE OPPOSITE  
OF HOPELESSNESS  
IS IMAGINATION.

DR. GARY NELSON

This report is calling us to use our collective imaginative hope for the next generation. The authors are leaders who are up close and personal with what is happening in the lives of our youth, young adults and churches today and they have a message for you. They invite us to reexamine what ministry, church and leadership can look like for the next generation. They long for us, together, to do whatever it takes to see this generation transformed by the Gospel. In this report you will see you and your church, and be given three actions steps to help you move forward in reaching the next generation.



**Renée Embree**

*Director of Youth & Family Ministries, Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada*

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# FORWARD

The Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Team, a representative voice of Canadian Baptists from across the country for over 15 years, has a mission to serve as “leaders in the family of Canadian Baptists, to advocate and make possible national and global synergies in the areas of youth, family and young adult ministry.” One of the priorities in fulfilling this mission was to provide a national voice on ministry to the next generation.

To do this, we determined that there needed to be a broader gathering of youth and family ministry leaders to give shape to this voice. In April 2016, we brought together 50 influential Canadian Baptist leaders from across the country – representing the wide diversity in our churches – to Niagara Falls for four days for the Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Ministry Forum. This gathering sought to reveal and address the obstacles and opportunities facing us as we engage and minister to 10-18 year olds in Canada. From the opening address by Dr. John H. Wilkinson, to the insights shared by our keynote facilitators – Dr. Dave

Overholt, Dr. Anna Robbins, Dr. Steve Brown and Dr. Gary Nelson – and the deep and honest discussions by participants in cluster groups, came the cumulative voice which we have titled *The Imaginative Hope Report*.

*The Imaginative Hope Report: Revealing the Obstacles and Opportunities to Reaching and Engaging the Next Generation with the Gospel* is a national voice on ministry to the next generation for Canadian Baptist churches. This voice is comprised of Canadian Baptist leaders who have a renewed love for their relationship with Jesus and the local church, along with a passion to see this emerging generation encounter the transformative work of Jesus in their lives.

In recent years there has been significant research tackling one key question: *Why are we losing our young people from the church?* While this has been hugely beneficial, that is no longer the most crucial question we need to be asking. Why? It is because our young people –

those under 18 – are no longer the millennial generation, a generation that grew up in the church but left in droves. There is a new generation: Generation Z (ages 5–18). They are not leaving the church; they have simply never been in our churches to begin with. Therefore, the question we need to now be asking is: *What must we do to reach and engage young people with the person and message of Jesus?*

**Now is the time for a new era of evangelism, discipleship and empowerment of this generation** as they relate to and understand the Church, the Body of Christ, and encounter the transformative power of Jesus Christ. To make the necessary shifts, we need to have a clear awareness of what is preventing the church from reaching youth, and what opportunities we can take advantage of in our current culture.

So now, as we interact with this post-Christendom and post-modern generation, there is great hope – a hope that is rooted in a new reality that we can imagine and desire to see come true throughout our churches. While there will be ongoing and significant opposition to being a follower of Jesus, joining the local church and being united as the body of Christ in our country, there can also be a brighter future for our young people, their world and the Christian faith community as we take this call to *The Imaginative Hope* seriously.

**It is our desire that this report provide church leaders with insights and practical resources to be a church community that more effectively reaches and engages this next generation.** It's time to let this next generation lead, engage with the key cultural issues of our time and give intentional focus to ministry for kids and youth in our churches and communities.

This is the collective work of the people who participated in the Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Ministry Forum 2016 and it is endorsed by the Executive Ministers of the Canadian Baptist denominations and the Executive Director of Canadian Baptist Ministries. Their support stresses the importance of next generation ministry in all of our churches, emphasizing that we must do whatever it takes to reach young people with the Gospel and the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.



**Rev. Matt Wilkinson**  
*Chair, Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Team*



## Dear Beloved Church,

We write this as Youth & Family Ministry Leaders who are saying that “we love the Church.” It is out of this love that we as the Church have a message for Canadian Baptists to hear.

### IMAGINE...

*Children bringing their families closer to God.*

*Youth leading our churches into their neighborhoods with the Good News.*

*Students introducing their friends to Christ through a vibrant faith.*

*Young adults integrating the values of God's Kingdom in all they do.*

*Families caring for the hurt, lonely and broken together.*

*The next generation being equipped to share their faith and seek biblical justice.*

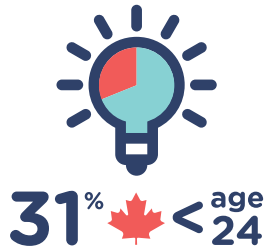
*Communities valuing, loving and supporting each other.*

*Churches fulfilling the call to be God's missional people.*

*All generations deeply in love with God, his Church and his mission.*

This is what we desire for the Canadian Baptist Church in Canada. But it's not just a dream. We can make it happen. Right here and now. In our neighborhoods, across our provinces, and throughout our country.

**Two numbers resonate  
deeply with us:**



31% of the Canadian population  
is under the age of 24.



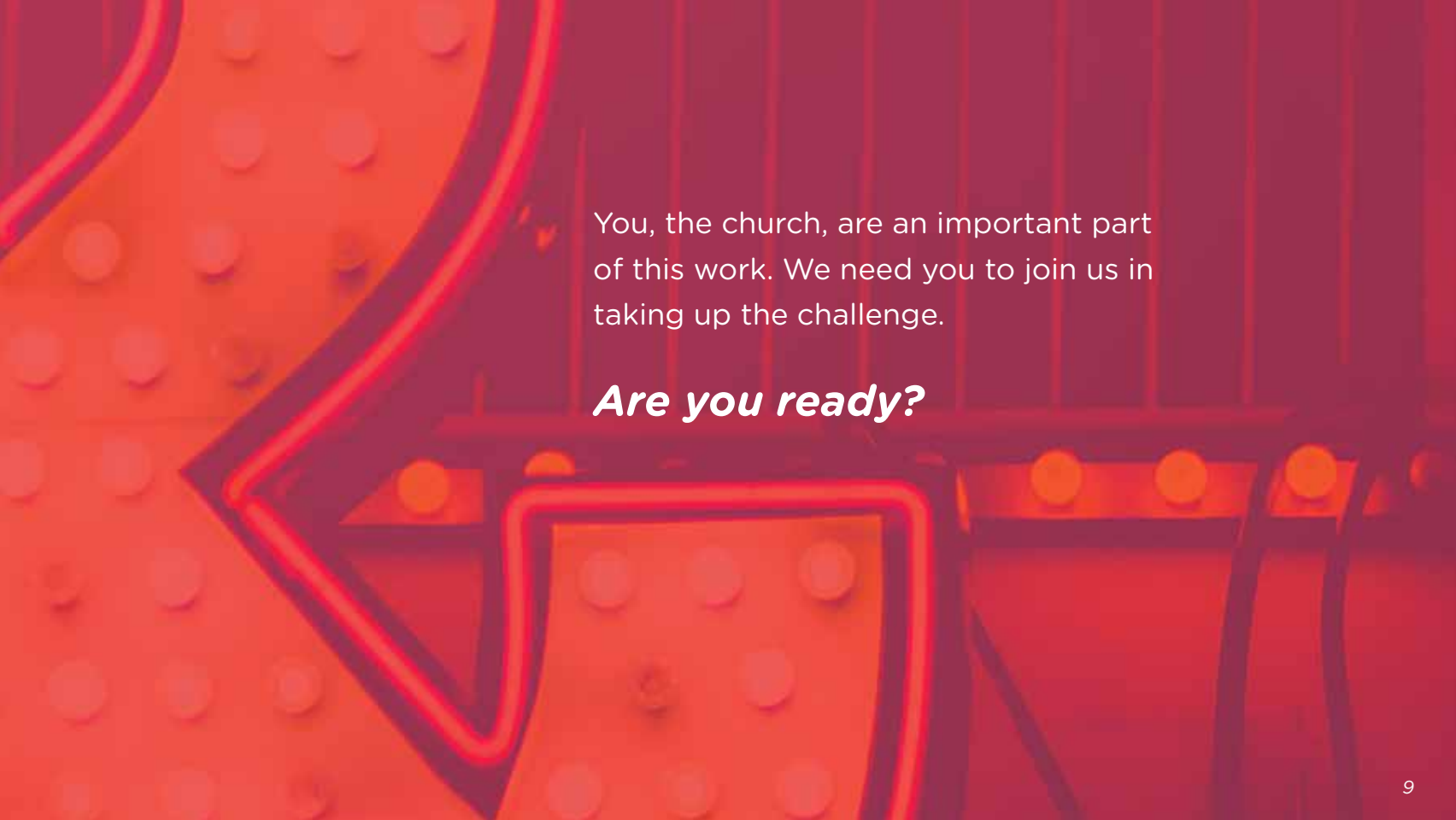
85% of Christians became a follower  
of Jesus between the ages of 4 and 14.

That means almost 10 million young Canadians are seeking meaning in their lives. They are desperately searching for a place to be loved, known and belong.

Beloved Church, we need to give greater focus and emphasis on the younger generations! This is our time to raise up God's banner for children and youth. We do not have ten or even five years to figure this out. We need to reach this generation now and we need to do it together. This is possible as our young people experience the genuine love of Jesus, the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, and are empowered to live out their faith.







You, the church, are an important part of this work. We need you to join us in taking up the challenge.

***Are you ready?***





# MAJOR OBSTACLES

TO REACH THE NEXT GENERATION  
WITH THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

## OBSTACLE



We, as Canadian Baptists, have neglected our own spiritual health and wellness.

We, as leaders and as churches have neglected our first love, Jesus Christ and in turn, His Church. We have forgotten about our own spiritual health and have let service for God replace fostering our relationship with Jesus. We must restore healthy rhythms to care for ourselves mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually in order to re-establish our core identity in Christ. Let's return to our first love, Jesus, and to His first love, the Church.

## OBSTACLE



We have created church structures that hinder needed change.

Current church structures are often inflexible, making it difficult for leaders who are not at the top of the chain, to feel heard and trusted. Our structures sometimes scare off new ideas and young leaders, or force conformity, as the new makes its way through slow structures and systems. Distrust, lack of communication and unhealthy practices have snuck into team leadership and church governance models, distracting from our joint mission together. Gary Nelson reminds us, "The pace of change is faster than the pace of learning." We need to allow ways for change to happen faster, by creating a church culture of freedom, empowerment and trust which enable us to be nimble and adaptive.

OBSTACLE

3



We have not engaged well in the significant issues of our time.

As churches in Canada, we have largely been ineffective in engaging cultural and other important issues. We have either been unwilling to engage or failed to do so with both biblical faithfulness and cultural sensitivity. Our failure to address these significant issues well has led the younger generation to conclude we are ignorant, apathetic or judgmental. We have not modeled to them how to live in a complex, multi-faith world. Some examples of pressing current issues the Church needs to address are: sexual identity, mental health, and the treatment of our Indigenous communities and other marginalized people.

OBSTACLE

4



We have not effectively fostered intergenerational relationships.

The younger generation feels disconnected from older ones. They are hungry for relationships with adults who love Jesus and will believe in them. They are longing to see parents live out faith beyond Sunday morning and Christian mentors who will walk with them through the complexity of life. Our churches need to be communities where everyone invests in the lives of the younger generation through caring relationships, serving together, mentoring opportunities and multi-generational leadership. Sunday worship services provide an opportunity to value and celebrate all ages, recognizing that teenagers especially need a place to belong in the church family during joint worship times.



OBSTACLE

5



We have embraced a discipleship that is failing our young people.

We continue to hold onto a shallow discipleship model in our churches, often focused more on the behavioural modification of our young people, rather than on deep spiritual transformation in their lives. In particular, this younger generation, is asking of faith, “Does it work? Does it actually make any difference in my life, my decisions, my family, the church, my neighbourhood, my world?” We cannot separate evangelism and discipleship. Together they need to invite youth to encounter the living God and allow them to see the real transformation he can bring to lives and communities. We need to paint a clear picture of the high calling to follow Jesus faithfully into the world. We, the Church, need to help this generation connect what they hear on Sunday and read in their Bibles to the other six days of the week, through a vibrant faith that enables them to navigate the complex issues of our time.

OBSTACLE



We have underestimated the transformative power of God.

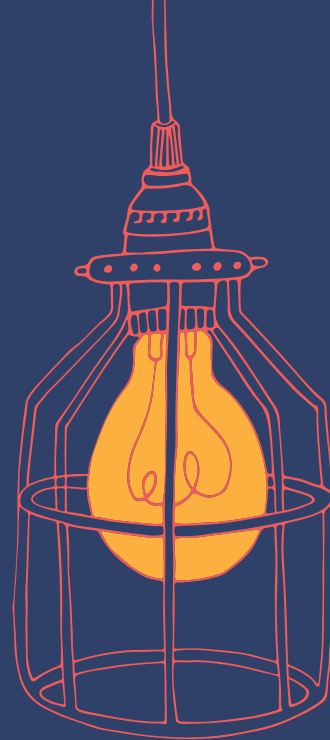
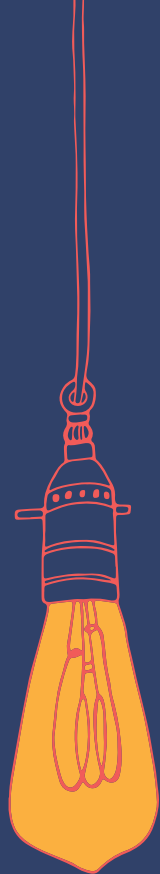
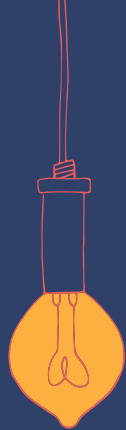
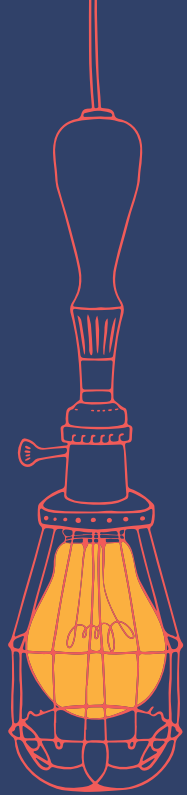
We have stopped trusting in God's mighty, supernatural power through the work and leading of the Holy Spirit and shamefully ignored the impact of the Gospel. We need to plunge the depths of our understanding of the Gospel, so we can preach it clearly and simply to this generation. Let's reclaim Canada as a mission field, by demonstrating through word, deed and sign that God's Kingdom is here. As we do, we need to trust God's power to transform lives and communities.

OBSTACLE



We have embraced a culture of consumerism in our churches.

We, as the Church, have failed to model God's Kingdom values of compassion and generosity in a way that counteracts society's immersion into consumerism and individualism. We need to follow the biblical examples of the early Church and embrace a culture of communal dependence. This generation needs to see faith lived out in the messiness of community: carrying each other's burdens, meeting each other's needs through the sharing of our possessions, giving sacrificially, welcoming the stranger, and genuine care for our neighbours.







# MAJOR OPPORTUNITIES

TO REACH THE NEXT GENERATION  
WITH THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST



OPPORTUNITY

No 1

BUILD  
BRIDGES



OPPORTUNITY

No 2

CONNECT THE  
GENERATIONS



This generation values Kingdom thinking rather than empire building.

This generation is looking for what unifies rather than divides. Our churches and denominations need to be places of strong unity, while embracing great diversity. We need to be defined by what we are for, rather than what we are against. Young people are looking to see where the Church is willing to be bridge-builders: across Canada, with organizations, communities, schools, and other facets of society.

This generation longs for caring adults in their lives.

This generation is seeking loving and caring adults who believe in them and are willing to invest in them. They want the older generations to speak into their lives, walk alongside them, give them opportunities and be connected in authentic relationships.

OPPORTUNITY

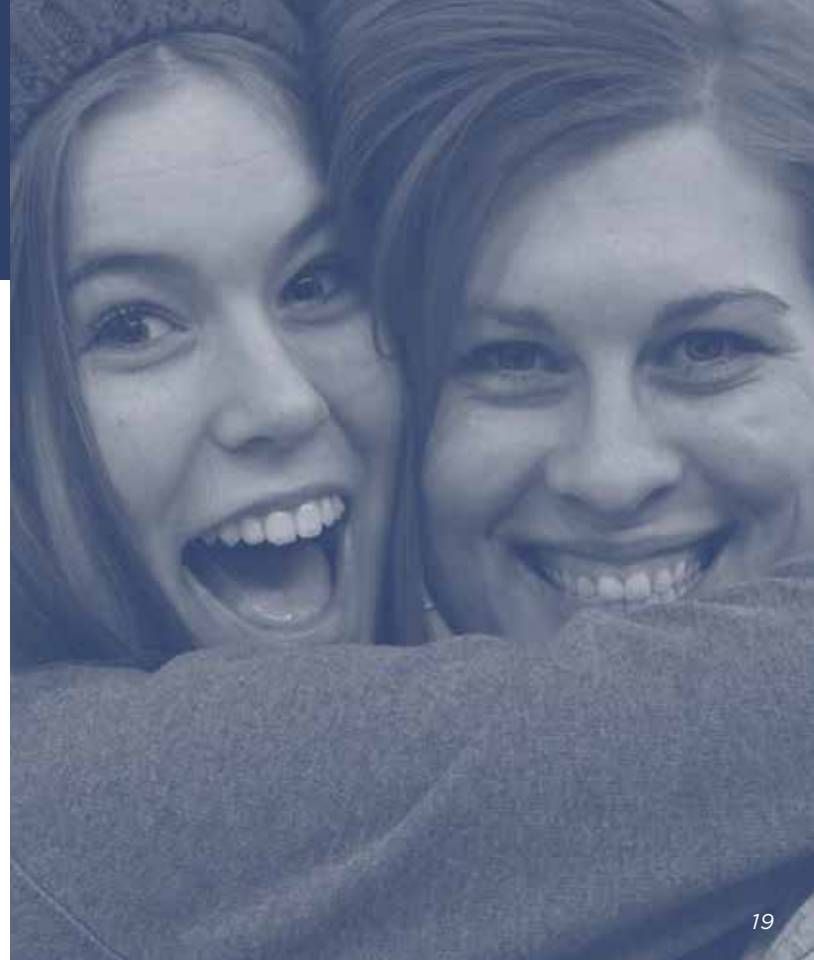
No 3

LET THEM  
LEAD



This generation is capable of leading.

This generation has willing and able leaders who are already leading on social media, sports teams, bands, business start-ups and in their schools, but rarely in the Church. We need to intentionally invest in these young leaders, allowing them to lead in the Church and empowering them to see the difference they can make in the world for the sake of the Kingdom. We need to give young people real leadership opportunities and listen to their dreams.



OPPORTUNITY

No 4

SPEAK  
UP!



This generation is open to spirituality.

This generation is curious and interested in spiritual things. It is us - leaders and older Christians, who are sometimes fearful to talk about spirituality. The younger generation is looking for deep and authentic conversations about spirituality, the Christian faith and how to make a real difference in the world.

OPPORTUNITY

No 5

SEEK BIBLICAL  
JUSTICE  
TOGETHER



This generation is globally connected.

This generation is more aware of global issues than any previous generation. We, the Church, can play a pivotal role in coming alongside young people in connecting their desire for justice with a deep biblical understanding of how to meaningfully engage locally and globally in a broken world.





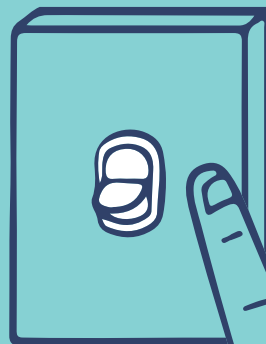
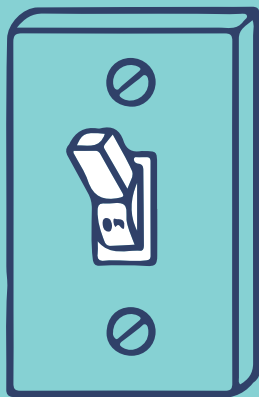
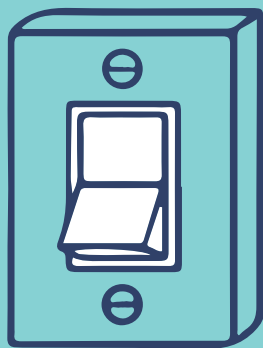


## *Dear Beloved Church,*

We, the leaders who gathered at the Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Forum recognize that together we have to take action – returning to our first love of Jesus, celebrating the importance of the local church, faithfully contextualize and preaching the Gospel, and intentionally discipling the next generation to have a living and vibrant faith.

Our Youth and Children's Pastors and workers will never reach the younger generation alone. They will never reach the nearly 10 million young people in Canada without you, the entire church body. Will we as the Church, commit to making it a denominational-wide priority to reach and disciple the youth and children of today?

To do this, there are three action steps for us to embark on together.







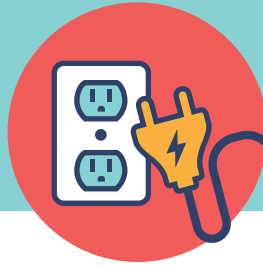
# ACTION STEPS FOR THE CHURCH

TO REACH THE NEXT GENERATION  
WITH THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST



ACTION STEP

No



## LET THEM LEAD

Empower youth and children to lead.

Include youth and children in the whole of your church now.

**QUESTION:**

## How will you empower this generation to lead, now?

**PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:**

- Ensure all ages are represented during worship services.
- Help every age identify and use their gifts in your church.
- Develop an intentional leadership development plan for children, youth and young adults.
- Invite children and youth onto existing ministry teams (e.g. worship, sound, greeting, praying, mission, preaching, video...)
- Invite a youth/young adult to co-lead your mission trip or service project.
- Brainstorm with children/youth on how to show and tell the Good News in your local school, community centre or neighbourhood. Let them lead the initiative.
- Release children/youth to lead now and train them later, as you go.
- Place children/youth in leadership over small groups of their peers.
- Listen to the Kingdom dreams of youth and help make them happen.



ACTION STEP

No 2



## ENGAGE CULTURE

Engage culture and the issues of our day with both grace and truth. This generation needs to understand and see a faith that can navigate the complexity of our world.

**QUESTION:**

## How will you disciple youth to have a living faith in a post-Christendom era?

**PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:**

- Learn about cultural issues from various sides, with humility.
- Develop a deep theology, and be able to explain it simply.
- Read the news and have an “in the news” sermon/devotional series for church/youth group/children’s ministries.
- Invite children/youth to ask difficult questions.
- With youth/children examine a popular song/TV show/movie and compare the messages to what the Bible says about that topic.
- Talk about cultural issues and tough topics from the pulpit.
- Help this generation connect the dots from Sunday to Monday.
- Help this generation apply the Bible to their everyday lives.
- Give this generation opportunities to see faith in action in the culture of today – serve together, share stories of God’s transformation in lives, engage in mission together, discuss global issues, talk about God in the places where you live, work, study and play.
- Regularly invite people to share, “Where did you see God at work today?”



ACTION STEP

No 3



## GIVE INTENTIONAL FOCUS TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH NOW

We are calling our churches and denominations to prioritize their investment in children, youth and family ministries. Recognizing the statistics and hearing the voice of the next generation, we need to spend extra time, energy and resources on this generation now, so they have the opportunity to be transformed by the Gospel.

**QUESTION:**

**How will you disproportionately focus your time, money and energy on the younger generation?**

**PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:**

- Increase your budget and staffing for children, youth and family ministries.
- Develop more volunteer leaders for children, youth and family ministries.
- Ensure your children, youth and family ministries have adequate resources and facilities to reach this generation with the Gospel and disciple this generation to live for Jesus.
- Invite all people in your church to invest in children and youth.
- Allow your next generation ministry leaders opportunities for theological and practical training.
- Ensure your children, youth and family ministry leaders are taking responsibility and have support for their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health.
- Give your children, youth and family ministry leaders adequate pay and vacation time.
- Examine your worship service to see if it is truly giving children and youth a place to belong and discover Jesus.
- Ask how your church can be a blessing to the children and youth in your community and do something about it.







## Dear Beloved Church,

Imagine a church that...

Equips and empowers the next generation to lead.

Engages culture with grace and truth.

Focuses on youth and children in the church and community.

### **We can be that church.**

*The time is now.*

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

-Ephesians 3:20-21

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# WHAT CANADIAN BAPTIST LEADERS ARE SAYING ABOUT IMAGINATIVE HOPE

“A fresh voice of confession and hope. This report is a must read for churches in order to understand the systemic reluctance of our Canadian Baptist family to empower the next generation to lead among us. I appreciate the confessional spirit of the obstacles listed, and I am thrilled to embrace the opportunities of hope captured in these pages. I especially give weight and value to opportunities 3 & 4...this generation is capable of leading; this generation is open to spirituality. May the content contained within be an inspiration and motivation to the Church in Canada, especially our Canadian Baptist Church, to act immediately and give way to this passionate and hopeful generation of Jesus followers.”



**Rev. Tim McCoy**

*Executive Minister,  
Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec*

“In a culture which marginalizes and maligns the Church it is imperative that we as Canadian Baptists hear the clarion call to renew our commitment to be radical followers of Jesus Christ. *The Imaginative Hope Report* is a clear, concise and urgent call to Canadian Baptist Churches. This is our time to reach, involve and empower our children and youth in the ministries of the Church. We don't have an option, our vitality and very existence is directly linked to the vigorous participation of youth who are looking for authentic faith and real engagement with culture. I strongly endorse this report and pray that as a Canadian family of churches we will be moved by the Holy Spirit to action!”



**Rev. Dr. Peter Reid**

*Executive Minister,  
Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada*

“When our four denominations in Canada, along with our partners internationally through CBM and in women’s ministry gather together, we remind each other that all voices are of equal importance. However, we have not heard the voices in areas of youth and family for some time. We have now; winsomely, loudly, clearly and with an invitation to both serious reflection and united engagement. May we read, give thanks for the opportunity to engage, and join with one another in this endeavour of framing and living out in community the voices that come to us powerfully in this paper.”



**Rev. Jeremy Bell**

*Executive Minister,  
Canadian Baptists  
of Western Canada*

“Reading *Imaginative Hope* reminds me of G.K. Chesterton’s oft-quoted declaration: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” You have laid out for our Canadian Baptist churches, and particularly their leaders, both lay and pastors, a future-looking agenda that is indeed difficult but not beyond our reach. Our greatest strength as a movement in Canada is that we are fundamentally a grassroots network of women and men animated by the Spirit of God and who are eager to follow Christ down new pathways. Both the Forum and the resulting document, *Imaginative Hope*, chart such a course, not only for greater participation of young people in our churches but the re-formation of local churches as culture-changers through youth engagement. It is a brave ideal that, though difficult, must be tried.”



**Rev. Dr. Terry Smith**

*Executive Director,  
Canadian Baptist Ministries*

“*Imaginative Hope* has the potential of revitalizing the Church, ensuring the biblical dynamic of passing on the flame to the next generations. This will require taking a hard look at our present practises and church culture to embrace and encourage fresh expressions of faith, compassion and leadership. As followers of Christ, we can engage intergenerationally in the task of capturing the minds and hearts of emerging generations with the hope of the Gospel.”



**Rev. David Rowley**

*General Secretary,  
Union d’Églises Baptistes  
Francophones du Canada*



**This report is written by the Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Ministry Team on behalf of voices represented at the Canadian Baptist Youth & Family Ministry Forum 2016. This report has been endorsed by the Executive Ministers of the Canadian Baptist denominations and the Executive Director of Canadian Baptist Ministries.**

[www.imaginativehope.ca](http://www.imaginativehope.ca)

*For more Information  
contact the Director  
of Next Generation  
Ministries in your region.*