

## MINISTERING TO YOUNG SINGLE ADULTS

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with assistance from

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### Introduction/background

In January 2004, there were 851,000 young single adults (YSAs), ages 18-30 years, in the United States and Canada. Best estimates suggest that 550,000 of these individuals were less active. More than 450,000 YSAs were unknown to a bishop, and Church headquarters had no known address for at least 205,000 YSAs. An unofficial membership audit suggests that 30 percent of YSA membership records are associated with the wrong stake.

Young single adults experience a natural period of transition, both in life and in the Church. Many leave home for school or work. Most move frequently, whether searching for better employment or pursuing educational opportunities. The Church activity of YSAs no longer revolves around the Young Men or Young Women programs, and many find the transition to elders quorum and Relief Society particularly difficult.

Many YSAs do not associate themselves with a particular ward. Instead, they “ward-hop,” floating from ward to ward, attending missionary “farewells” and “homecomings,” looking for friends or a companion. Moreover, the greatest risk of inactivity occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 years; each year, approximately 45,000 YSAs become inactive. Both ward-hopping and the high risk of inactivity among YSAs indicate that, as a Church, we are not ministering effectively to YSAs.

### Three Key Factors Leading to Ward-hopping and Inactivity

#### Mobility

Young single adults are very mobile, often moving three or four times annually. This means that, during the first six or seven years following high school graduation, YSAs are rarely in the same ward—let alone the same location—for more than a few months at a time.

Additionally, the majority of YSAs do not live with their parents. Seventy percent of YSAs over 21 years live away from home, and 40-50 percent of those 18-20 years also live away from home. Returned missionaries are no exception to these generalizations, often moving away from home within a short time of their return.

Although this mobility is a natural consequence of the young adults’ stage of life, it means that priesthood and auxiliary leaders must make a concerted effort to acquire and maintain contact with YSAs.

### Lack of Responsibilities or Connectedness or Roots

Even when YSAs live in a location for an extended period, they rarely receive a calling. This lack of responsibility enables 18-25 year olds to float on Sundays. Although bishops often work intensively with 18 year-old men to prepare them for missions, this is a relatively small proportion of YSAs.

Moreover, the Church experience of an individual changes drastically when he or she turns 18. Prior to that time, youth are interviewed on a regular basis, they are part of a quorum or class and they have access to leaders and activities designed especially for them. Through Aaronic Priesthood assignments, Duty to God, and Personal Progress, they have clearly defined expectations of attendance and activity, supported by specific responsibilities and programs. As a YSA, however, these support systems are no longer applicable. Instead, YSAs may feel lost in a large elders quorum or Relief Society, which often feature discussions and activities unrelated to their interests.

Addressing this particular challenge does not require a duplication of Young Men and Young Women programs. However, leaders should strive to let YSAs know that there is still a place in the Church for them, that they can be spiritually nourished through their attendance in Sunday meetings, and that they will be missed if they are not present.

### Little Accountability

Few YSAs can definitively answer two important questions: "Who is your bishop?" and "Do you feel accountable to him?"

Some of the difficulty lies in the natural uprooted state of YSAs and the weaker accountability system for them *as adults*. For example, while YSAs are theoretically still responsible to their parents, bishop and appropriate priesthood and auxiliary leaders, in reality, these relationships weaken after high school. This becomes a particular issue for YSAs needing help in the repentance process. At the same time, however, current Church structures do not make it easy to keep track of these individuals.

One of the least effective organizations for establishing accountability is a multistake YSA unit. Active YSAs from several stakes may choose to attend. Their membership records are transferred, while all other YSAs remain assigned to their conventional wards. Representative of the challenge is one multistake unit that serves 200 of the 2,800 YSAs in seven stakes. Perhaps an additional 400 YSAs are active in their conventional wards, but 2,200 are less active or floating. Stake presidents see the high rate of activity in the multistake unit and believe that all is well. The less-active fall through administrative cracks, in part because multiple stake presidents and bishops are involved. Too often, no priesthood leader takes accountability for these YSAs.

Unless care is taken for accountability, similar problems can arise in an individual stake YSA ward unless all YSA memberships are assigned to the unit except those who request to remain in the conventional ward.

## Recommendations

During the past two years, stake and ward leaders in Utah, Idaho, California, Chicago, Illinois, and Washington, D.C. have worked closely with institute directors and active YSAs to locate and invite the less-active to return. Thousands have returned to the Church. In the process, leaders have gained a greater appreciation for the importance of an active friend, a strong bishop who takes an interest in individuals, a calling, activities with peers, and a strong accountability system. Based on these experiences and other observations, we make the following recommendations:

1. A member of the bishopric should interview all 18-21 year olds on a regular basis (semi-annually at a minimum).
2. Each stake should take ecclesiastical responsibility for its own YSAs. The *Church Handbook of Instructions* should be followed in establishing a stake council for YSAs, preferably with an assigned high councilor who is a strong leader. Stake and ward leaders should internalize John 17:12 where the Savior said, "Those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost."
3. Each stake needs to determine the YSAs that live in the stake, know their address, who their bishop is, and establish a system of accountability.
4. Each stake should develop a search and rescue program for YSAs. The best missionaries are the active YSAs. Where appropriate, it is also important to involve the institute leaders.
5. A call should be extended to each worthy young person. Appropriate priesthood assignments should be given to the men and opportunities to serve to both men and women.
6. When a YSA unit exists within a stake, all YSAs should be assigned to it. (Those who live at home may request to remain in the conventional ward.) This establishes clear accountability for the spiritual welfare of YSAs.

Some Idaho YSA units have already implemented this suggestion, experiencing a significant increase in activation, ordinations and convert baptisms. Thirty-seven units activated 446 YSAs, ordained 97 to the priesthood, and baptized 40 converts in a six-month period. In stakes where the membership records of the less-active remain in the conventional wards, essentially no activation or missionary work took place.

7. Eliminate overlay circumstances. In the Salt Lake Valley and in Davis County, YSAs have three or four choices as to which ward they attend: conventional, individual or multistake YSA, University of Utah, or ethnic. The muddling of accountability is understandable.
8. Stake and multistake activities should be held on a regular basis. For the YSAs, it is essential that the circle of interaction be widened if ward-hopping and inactivity are to be reduced. Multistake activities should be organized through the coordinating council.

## Summary

It is our belief that the plight of the young single adults is one of the most serious challenges facing the Church. Annual losses are large at approximately 45,000. The largest risk of inactivity occurs between 18 and 25 years of age. The transition of accountability as the young single adult goes from priest to elder or Laurel to Relief Society is cumbersome and ineffective. Priesthood and auxiliary supervision weakens just as young people are changing homes, friends and wards. Until the last year or two, there was almost no attention given to this problem. In some parts of North America, stake presidents are beginning to take notice. The recommendations are an attempt to state what has worked in those stakes which have made a determined effort to find and activate their young single adults.