GUIDE

Youth ministries should print leader and serve team shirts before the camp shirt.

Lifeway's new survey of young adults points a youth ministry's first shirt order at the leaders and serve teams students see every week.

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When a youth ministry plans its shirts for the year, the first order belongs to the adult leaders and the student serve teams, not the camp souvenir. On November 17, 2026, Lifeway Research published a survey of 1,318 evangelical young adults ages 18 to 29. Asked which people at church shaped their faith, they named a youth minister (44%) and other adult youth leaders (42%) more often than anyone except the lead pastor and a Sunday School teacher. In a separate list of church experiences, 42% named serving at church, while camp drew 26% on the program list. Asked what made an adult at church influential, 54% said that adult was present and approachable, and that is the one trait in the survey a shirt can serve.

Young adults rank their youth leaders third and fourth among the church people who shaped them

Evangelical young adults name their youth minister and their adult youth leaders more often than almost anyone else at church. Lifeway Research surveyed 1,318 evangelical young adults ages 18 to 29 online from March 10 to April 3, 2026, and asked which people at church helped them grow in their walk with Jesus. The lead pastor led at 57% and a Sunday School teacher followed at 49%. A youth minister came next at 44% and other adult youth leaders at 42%, ahead of a friend their own age (36%), students a few years older (32%), a children's minister (32%) and a music ministry leader (32%).

The shirt argument stops at the youth room because the lead pastor and the Sunday School teacher are already easy to find: the pastor is the one adult every family in the building can point to, and the teacher stands at the front of one classroom, while a youth room puts several

adults among a crowd of students who have to tell them apart.

Chuck Peters, director of NextGen ministry at Lifeway, put the finding this way: "It's not the lesson you lead or how good a teacher someone is that stands out as the primary difference maker. It's the relational investment of committed, consistent, connected, Christ-like adults who care about kids."

A leader shirt serves the one trait in Lifeway's survey that clothing can reach

A leader shirt cannot supply most of what made an adult at church influential, but it directly serves one trait young adults named. When Lifeway asked what made those adults influential, young adults named a passion for seeking God (59%), explanations of what the Bible said (56%), an example of living out their faith (55%), and being present and approachable (54%). No shirt supplies passion, Bible teaching or example. Being present and approachable is different. More than half of these young adults named it, and a student cannot approach an adult the student cannot find.

Of all the Ministry T-Shirts a youth group buys, the leader shirt is the one whose job lines up with a number in the survey. One clear color with LEADER across the back identifies every adult in the room from the door, on an ordinary Wednesday as much as on a big night. The same shirt unifies the adults as one team, and a verse on the sleeve tells students why those adults are there.

Care sits right beside approachability in the survey, at 53%. Lifeway's January 2026 study of young adults who left church found that "the odds of dropping out are 1.17 times lower for every additional unit of agreement" that a youth leader genuinely cared about them before age 18. In plain terms, the more strongly a young adult agreed that a youth leader cared, the less likely that young adult was to have left church. The caring is the leader's work. A shirt cannot make a leader care, but it can make the leader who does care easy to find.

Serving at church shaped young adults more often than camp, retreats or mission trips

Serving at church was named by 42% of evangelical young adults as among their most impactful experiences, a larger share than named a retreat, conference or discipleship weekend (30%), camp (26%) or a mission trip (26%). Lifeway reported serving in a list of other church experiences and camp in a list of programs, so the figures come from separate questions. Inside the program list alone, the weekly rhythm still wins: weekly worship services

(48%), weekly small group Bible studies (40%), youth group social activities (37%) and youth worship services (35%) all outrank the retreat, camp and the mission trip. Lifeway also reported that 59% of these young adults have regular responsibilities at their church now.

In a youth ministry, serving usually means a student serve team: greeters at the door, students running slides and sound, the worship band, and the setup crew who stack chairs after the last game. Those students are doing something young adults rank among their most formative experiences, and they are doing it in public, every week, in front of younger students.

A serve team shirt marks the role, not the event. A sixth grader who sees an eighth grader in a serve team shirt at the welcome table sees a job a student can hold. The same shirt tells the eighth grader that the church expects them back next week.

The strongest case for ordering the camp shirt first is that camp shirts travel

The best argument for ordering the camp shirt first is that the Lifeway numbers may undercount camp. Camp's 26% appears to be a share of everyone asked, not of campers alone, and Lifeway does not report how campers rated camp. Camp is also where many leader relationships deepen: a week in a cabin can build more between a student and an adult than a semester of Wednesdays. And students wear camp shirts for years, at school and at home, which they will never do with a leader shirt.

The last point is true and worth conceding plainly: camp shirts travel, leader shirts work. A camp shirt carries the week's verse into hallways no leader will ever enter, and it does nothing to help a new student find an adult on a Wednesday night. The cabin argument supports the leader case, because if camp matters for the time students spend with adults, the adults are what matters, and they are the same people in the youth room in August as in the cabin in June. The leader shirt also goes to camp: when several churches fill one camp, a leader in the color students have seen all year is the adult every camper already knows how to find, which is both a safety job and a pastoral one. And this is about sequence, not exclusion. The camp shirt still gets ordered, second, from a budget that has already covered the people who show up every week.

The survey has a limit: it measures what young adults remember about people and experiences, not clothing. No study shows that a leader shirt changes faith outcomes, and this essay does not claim one does. The claim is narrower. The survey shows where young adults say their faith was formed, and a ministry deciding where its first shirt budget goes should follow that.

Plan the first order from the leader and serve team roster

The first shirt order starts with a list of names, not a guessed headcount. List every adult who serves in the youth ministry at least twice a month, then every student on a serve team, grouped by team. That list sets the quantities. Adults can give an exact size, so ask each one. Students grow during the year, so size serve team shirts a step larger and hold two or three extras in the middle sizes for students who join in January.

Color does most of the work. Pick one leader color that no student shirt will ever use, and one serve team color that reads as a team from across the room. If the youth group's student shirt is navy, the leaders should not wear navy. Put the role in large letters across the back, because in a crowd students usually spot adults from behind. Leave the year off leader and serve team shirts, so the same design still fits a leader who joins in February and the team next fall.

A verse belongs on these shirts because it says why the person is wearing one. 1 Peter 4:10, on using whatever gift you have received to serve others, fits a serve team. 1 Timothy 4:12, on setting an example for the believers, fits student leaders. Choose the translation your church reads and copy it exactly. Ministry Gear approves every design with the ministry before anything prints, and that proof is the time to check the verse word for word.

Small youth groups can skip the leader shirt for now

A youth ministry with three adults and a dozen students does not need a leader shirt to make its leaders easy to find, because every student already knows them by name. Spend nothing on leader shirts until the room grows or new families arrive faster than people can learn their names. The same goes for a serve team that exists only on paper: print shirts for the students who are serving now, not for the team the ministry hopes to have.

The signs that it is time to order are practical. A visiting parent cannot tell who is in charge. A new student asks a peer instead of an adult. A large event brings in groups from several churches. At that point a leader shirt does a job a name tag cannot do as well.

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The order for the year: leader and serve team shirts before fall kickoff, so they are on from the first night new sixth graders walk in; a small reorder in January for new leaders and serve team members; then the camp shirt in the spring, with that week's dates, theme and verse, designed around the leader color already in use. The shirts that work every week go first.

Further reading

1. Lifeway Research, survey of 1,318 evangelical young adults ages 18 to 29 on the people, programs and serving that shaped their faith; the primary source for every percentage in this essay research.lifeway.com/2026/11/17/young-adults-say-church-home-and-smartphones-have-shaped-their-faith
2. Lifeway Research, analysis of young adults leaving church, including the finding that a youth leader's genuine care lowered the odds of dropping out research.lifeway.com/2026/01/26/what-can-womens-ministry-do-to-address-young-adults-leaving-the-church

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