

Shift Study Guide

How to use this study guide

Shift is a collection of short films that explore various aspects of one of the most talked about issues facing the Christian Reformed Church today: the exodus of young adults from our congregations. Intentionally provoking and intended to generate much-needed conversations, the scenes that play out throughout *Shift* explore different aspects of the young adult experience in order to help churches begin to consider how to address the alarming trend of young people leaving the church.

Shift is designed to be used as an intergenerational small group study (although it can also be a valuable tool for specific groups within the church, such as church councils and other leadership committees). We encourage you to gather people of all ages together from your congregation to view the film, stopping at the end of each scene for a time of discussion using the *Shift* Study Guide. Each scene in the film is accompanied by a section in the study guide that provides a brief background to the scene (to be read aloud after watching the clip), discussion questions, and suggested ways to respond. We suggest that you have each participant bring a notebook and pen to jot down notes while watching the film and to use during the discussion time.

The amount of time you spend on this study is up to you. Some may choose to view all the clips in one sitting, stopping for discussion in-between scenes. Others may choose to tackle half of the clips in one session and half in another, and others may dedicate each meeting to viewing and discussing only a few scenes at a time. No matter how you choose to break it up, we strongly recommend that you find a leader to facilitate this study and have that person preview the whole film and all of the study guide material in advance, that way you can structure your study in a way that best serves your particular setting.

Some of the topics this film addresses may be particularly sensitive for some viewers. Issues such as singleness, pastoral response to doubt, arguments in the church, and cultural traditions are presented in ways meant to elicit reaction and reflection. We encourage you to approach this study with an open heart and mind, praying that God will work through the film to bring generations together in honest and open conversation, moving the church to respond in new ways to reverse the prevailing trends.

We welcome your feedback. If you have any questions or comments, feel free to email the creative team behind the film at info@terpstracreative.com.

Scene 1: The First Confession

Read

Young adults are leaving the Christian Reformed Church.

Some are leaving the denomination for other churches from different backgrounds. Others—as many as three in five, according to the latest research by The Barna Group—are disconnecting from the church and organized religion as a whole as they move from their teens into their twenties. As a denomination already facing a declining membership base, this young adult exodus is an issue we must rise to address if we want to see the CRC to continue into the future.

Why are young adults leaving the CRC? Why are young adults leaving their faith? This film seeks to generate discussion about these crucial questions.

The film's script was written based on several years of conversations with young adults who have left the CRC, with young adults who have *not* left the CRC, and with pastors who are struggling to minister to all generations in their congregations, especially young adults. The content of the film was also based on a survey of more than 60 young adults from across North America who responded with their thoughts about the denomination and its future.

Discuss

1. The young adults in this first scene provide a snapshot of some reasons for young adults' frustration with the CRC. Which reasons resonated with you? Which were you surprised to hear?
2. Do you think any of these young adults' concerns are valid? Which ones do you have a hard time hearing?
3. Are there any other reasons (not mentioned in the film) that you think may cause young adults to leave the CRC?

Respond

1. Make a list of reasons why you have stayed in the CRC. (We'll come back to this in the end.)
2. Consider ways you can begin conversations with people (young and old) in your community about this topic.
3. As a group, pray as the Spirit leads for the young adults that remain in the CRC, and for those that have left.

Scene 2: Single and (Not) Loving It

Read

There seems to be a common trajectory among many young adults who find themselves fitting easily into the life of the CRC. Let's call them the "Classic CRC Kids." These young adults graduate from high school and often attend some sort of post-secondary education, often one of our "own" colleges or universities, like Calvin, Dordt, Redeemer, or Trinity. The Classic CRC Kid meets a special someone and the new couple proceeds through the stages of dating and engagement into marriage. A few years of wedded bliss later, the couple has a baby and they are enfolded into the life of their local Christian Reformed Church.

Now, there is nothing wrong with this scenario. However, for the increasing amount of young adults whose lives do not follow this trajectory or timeline, life at church can sometimes feel awkward, uncomfortable, and lonely.

The young woman in this scene describes her experience attending church as a single person. Living away from friends and outside the typical caste of "Married-With-Two-Kids," she is unsure of her place in her congregation. This is a scene that plays out in congregations across the denomination. Perhaps you see shades of your sister or maybe even your own daughter in her story.

Many church folks are family-oriented, and so when someone who lives outside the traditional mold shows up at church, the rest of us may not know how to respond. But how we respond can make all the difference in the world.

Discuss

1. Have you ever attended church on your own? What was the experience like? How did others respond to you? Did you feel welcomed?
2. What are some of the pros of being single? What are some of the cons?
3. What other kinds of people may your church be inadvertently isolating?

Respond

1. Explore a few ways that your church can be more welcoming to people who do not fit into the typical mold of a "Christian family" (for example: singles, couples who cannot have children, single parents, divorced adults, homosexuals, blended families, and so on).
2. Write down a few ways that you personally can be more welcoming to people from these groups.
3. Pray as the Spirit leads, and for the people in your church who may not feel welcomed, asking God to help your church be more welcoming.

Scene 3: Denomination Smoothie

Read

The characters in this scene are discussing a perspective that is very common among young adults today: church denominations don't really matter anymore. Frankly, young adults don't have the same commitment to their denominations as their parents and grandparents did. In a recent survey done by the CRC's Young Adult Leadership Taskforce at King's University College in Edmonton, students were asked to answer the question "What are the three biggest factors in your choosing of a local church to attend/join?" While authentic leadership, friendliness of the church, authentic worship, and biblical preaching were all top factors, not one young adult chose denominational affiliation or doctrinal accuracy. (To see more from that interesting survey, visit yalt.crcna.org/not-what-you-d-expect/)

Why is denomination loyalty not a priority for young adults? Perhaps because young adults have developed a larger community outside the CRC, through involvement in sports, work, or school. Perhaps they are more aware and appreciative of other perspectives, sharing community with friends who have different theological backgrounds but who are still passionate Christians. Perhaps young adults are more passionate about unity across theological differences. And perhaps young adults have been shaped by the dominant social norms, which claim that all perspectives and beliefs are valid and should be respected.

In this scene, the young man asks, "So you just mix and match your beliefs together?" The young woman answers, "Sure, why not?" It's important to note here that the young adults in the scene are not talking about mixing and matching different religions into one belief system. They are talking about appreciating different pieces of theology from different Christian denominations.

While there is a visible lack of allegiance to denominations in the current generation of young adults, many of those surveyed for this film praised the CRC for their solid theology and worldview. Many shared appreciation for the CRC's biblical preaching and for its strong emphasis on God's redemptive work in all of creation.

Discuss

1. Describe your own loyalty to the Christian Reformed denomination in comparison to the loyalty of the young adults in the film.
2. What are the pros and cons of having a deep loyalty to one denomination?
3. What are the pros and cons of having an appreciation for various denominations?

Respond

1. Have a conversation this week with someone from a different generation in your church about their view of denominations.
2. Pray as the Spirit leads, and for the future direction of our CRC denomination.

Scene 4: Two Voices to Listen To

Read

Some of the kids in our churches are raised in the “CRC Bubble”—attending Sunday School, Christian schools, GEMS/Cadets, youth group, and catechism class. Although there is great merit in raising children in a Christian environment, some young adults are finding the transition from high school and youth group to work or university to be extremely challenging. When they venture off into the “world” for school or work, many of them are surprised at what they find. Rather than finding a big, scary place filled with evil people (which they anticipated from years of hearing about “unbelievers”), they are meeting passionate, smart people, many of whom don’t believe in God. At secular colleges and universities, they encounter humanist and postmodern ideologies that seem to make sense, leaving their heads spinning. The “world” isn’t quite as bad as they expected. These “unbelievers” can actually be lovely people! Add to it that their professors and peers have some pretty good arguments for being so turned off by religion, and all of sudden many are finding themselves questioning the faith they have grown up with.

When young adults struggle through questions of doubt, hearing pat responses from pastors, parents, and church leaders is frustrating and not at all helpful. People need space to ask the hard questions. They need rational, clear arguments that defend the existence of God and the Christian claim to exclusive truth. And they need to be equipped to critically examine the secular worldview and challenge the postmodern mindset.

Discuss

1. Which character in the pastor-student scene do you most resonate with? Are you usually the one giving advice or receiving advice?
2. For young adults: Do you struggle with faith questions like the student in this scene? Where do you turn for answers?
3. For pastors and church leaders: How can you avoid giving cliché answers to members in your congregation who struggle with doubt?

Respond

1. List ways your church can better respond to people who are struggling with big faith questions in your community.
2. Pray as the Spirit leads, and for people in your community who are wrestling with big questions.

Scene 5: The Dutch Bubble

Read

We have to be able to laugh at ourselves a little in this scene.

We all know that the CRC's background is Dutch, and that we have our funny little quirks as a community. There are common sayings, traditions and customs that are shared regularly.

There are many beautiful things about the Dutch culture that many Reformed young adults deeply appreciate. Many young adults from Dutch backgrounds feel like the CRC is secure, familiar, and predictable. It's fun to play "Dutch Bingo" and fit in so easily when visiting other congregations. It's like one big, connected family spread out across many different churches.

However, there are some drawbacks to being so richly steeped in one particular tradition. People who are not Dutch often feel like they are constantly living on the outside, not quite privy to all the inside jokes and traditions. It can really make someone feel disconnected from the community. In addition to being somewhat isolating, a monocultural community is just not something that is valued in today's culture. Today's culture places a high value on promoting ethnic diversity, inclusiveness, and being welcoming of all people from all places in the world. Many young adults (especially those in cities) live, work, study, and relax with peers from a wide variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

When a local church is heavily monocultural (be it Dutch or another ethnicity), it can very easily seem like an "insider's club" that excludes people from other backgrounds. It also may make it difficult for church members to invite friends who do not fit in, as we see in this scene.

Discuss

1. Describe your church's cultural makeup.
2. What do you love about the culture of your local church?
3. Which groups are "in" and which groups are excluded from the dominant culture in your church?
4. Besides cultural/ethnic reasons, what are some other reasons that visitors could feel excluded when attending your church?

Respond

1. List ways your congregation can become more welcoming to visitors when they come in the door on Sunday morning.
2. List ways your congregation can become more actively involved in your local neighborhood.
3. Pray as the Spirit leads, and for the people outside your church community.

Scene 6: Let's Fight About It

Read

Jesus was a man of peace. In the Sermon on the Mount, He taught with these words: "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." (*Matthew 5:39-42, NIV*)

It would be beautiful if Christians knew how to follow Jesus' words regularly. However, as we know, sin creeps into our churches and relationships, ruining the potential we have for being peace-makers. Churches—even Christian Reformed Churches! —are often divided by angry conversations, lingering resentments, and backhanded gossip. We seldom see the kind of reconciliation taking place that Jesus calls us to in Matthew 5:23-24: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

Many young adults are tired of the arguments. After trying to represent Christ to their peers outside of church, it is frustrating and discouraging to witness Christians bickering with each other within the church.

And frankly, young adults feel that there are many bigger issues to rally around. Arguing about the way things are run inside the local church doesn't seem quite as important as discussing how to respond to major concerns outside of the church, like poverty, war, and injustice.

Discuss

1. Does your congregation suffer from a critical, judgmental spirit?
2. Is there ever an appropriate time for argument or criticism between Christians?
3. Are there people in your community that you need to forgive? Are there people you need to seek forgiveness from?

Respond

1. List ways your community can become more forgiving, accepting, and respectful of others.
2. Pray as the Spirit leads, and for unity and forgiveness within our churches.

Scene 7: To Be or Not to Be [Relevant]

Read

The characters here represent a few of the many opinions on how to address the issue of young adults leaving the CRC. Their voices represent some of the generational differences that exist within congregations and the problems that can arise when the topic is brought up.

In the scene, the older members are feeling slighted. They built the church; they were the ones who gave up their time and money many years ago to establish strong CRC communities. They poured their energy into the church, and they don't want to see new members tamper with the fruit of their hard work. As the older woman says, "We should *not* change with the times. The church hasn't changed in 50 years. I don't see why we need to start now."

The younger woman also feels frustrated. She sees the changing culture around her, and wants the church to adapt quickly to be more relevant to the young people in the pews. She wants the church to pour its energy into the younger generations, to ensure they will stick around. She pleads with the older members, "We have to change with the times or there won't be a church left in a few years!" (Remember that their voices are stereotypes of generational differences; there are, of course, many people who do not share the same opinions as those represented by their generation in this scene.)

While these characters represent the extremes of the wide spectrum of opinions on these issues, the conversation reminds us just how challenging this topic can be for churches to confront. Personal preferences, past experiences, and assumptions about one another can make it difficult to come to consensus on issues like how to engage young adults. And when differences of opinion cause a stalemate, the tendency is to push off decisions until a later date, slowing down the process even more.

Did you notice that there were no young adults actually in the conversation? Perhaps they weren't invited to the dialogue, or perhaps they decided not to come. Either way, wouldn't it be helpful for all generations to be represented when decisions are being made?

Discuss

1. Which character in this scene do you most agree with?
2. How does your community make decisions when there is disagreement about how to proceed?
3. Why is it so difficult for us to let go of our desires for how church should be run so that we can worship with people who have different preferences?

Respond

1. Make a simple, straightforward decision today about how you will personally engage with someone from a different generation in your church this week.
2. Pray as the Spirit leads, and for understanding and unity in the church.

Scene 8: I'll Be There

Read

A pastor recently shared with us that he wanted to do something for the young adults in his church. A group of them had admitted to him that they felt they had no place to belong in their congregation. They felt too old for youth group and too young for adult education classes. They wanted a “young adult group” where they could meet peers and fit in.

The pastor and some other adults in the church planned a kickoff event for a Young Adult Group at the church.

No one showed up.

Like the man in the bowling alley, many pastors and church leaders are frustrated with the duality of the young adult generation. They like to complain about church, but don't commit to changing anything themselves. They criticize church leadership, but are hesitant to step into leadership roles. And above all, young adults are notorious for their lack of commitment. It's actually one of the key traits of the generation!

Discuss

1. Why do you think young adults are so hesitant to commit?
2. Whose responsibility is it to have young adults engaged in the church? How can both young adults and older adults better work toward a committed relationship with each other?
3. How well does your church empower, trust, and equip young adults to become leaders?
4. Are the young adults in your community committed to your church?

Respond

1. Young Adults: Share what will help you become more committed and connected to your church.
2. Together, make a list of how you think your church can effectively engage young adults.
3. Pray as the Spirit leads, and for specific young adults in your congregation.

Scene 9: Coming to Church?

Read

In our media-saturated culture, we have quickly developed a need to be entertained regularly. One pastor admitted recently that he needed to watch at least one TV show every day to relax and unwind. Without his daily dose of entertainment, he became grumpy and frustrated.

It's easy to become addicted to the technology and entertainment that surrounds us. Video games, Facebook, TV shows, movies, music, and the latest YouTube viral videos are always readily available and just a click away. We are turning into people who are always staring at some sort of screen. This is especially true for young adults, who grew up immersed in this wave of new technology. And although these forms of media aren't bad in and of themselves, they far too easily capture our attention, distracting us from making real connections, both to other people and to God.

Are young adults—and people of all generations, for that matter—being distracted into apathy? Are we slowly losing our passion for spiritual discipline, worship, and God Himself, as we consume entertainment and media? Are we becoming like the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3, whom John warned was apathetic and “lukewarm”?

Discuss

1. What most distracts you in everyday life? Do you notice your spiritual life suffers because of these distractions?
2. It's easy to make excuses for not attending church or committing to a church community. Are these excuses ever valid?
3. One of the young women in the scene says, “There's nothing wrong with missing a church service now and then.” Do you agree?

Respond

1. Commit to a specific plan to reduce the amount of time you spend on your distractions. Write it down and share it with the group.
2. Brainstorm ways your church can address the topic of technology, media, and entertainment.
3. Pray as the Spirit leads. Pray that God will give us clarity, focus, and discipline.

Scene 10: Solemn

Read

Across North America, CRC worship spaces cover a wide range of styles, spanning a variety of flavors; from creative to intellectual, casual to austere, and everywhere in between. Every local church is different.

Many of the young adults we surveyed admitted that they were discontent with CRC worship services. However, it was not the style or content of the services that frustrated them. Rather, it was a “lack of vitality,” and a “spiritual climate that felt dry.” Many were tired of the emphasis of “head knowledge over heart knowledge,” and expressed a longing for more of the Holy Spirit in the church.

It's easy to turn this conversation into a discussion about styles of worship. But perhaps that's not what this is about. Perhaps we would be more on track if we spent time praying for the Holy Spirit's leadership in the church. What would it look like if we surrender our worship wars and preferences to God, and ask that the Spirit would be what moves and shapes us, in and through our worship? Perhaps we could learn to follow the Spirit's lead in our worship services, submitting our worship to God, no matter the exterior elements that should or should not be changed.

Many of the surveyed young adults hope that the CRC will become more dependent on the Spirit's direction, embracing the Spirit's freedom. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Corinthians 3:17)

Discuss

1. Every local church is different. Do you feel that your church is too serious or solemn?
2. Do you agree with the young man's assessment that Christian Reformed people are too serious sometimes?
3. What do visitors to your church notice when they attend a worship service?

Respond

1. List ways that your congregation can move from discussions about worship, to prayers for Spirit-inspired worship.
2. Pray as the Spirit leads. Pray for the Holy Spirit to direct and revive the CRC.

Scene 11: The Last Confession

Read

The film closes on a positive note. The same young adults who voiced their concerns at the beginning say why, despite issues they pointed out previously, they are committed to the CRC. Although this may seem contradictory, it is a reflection of the feelings of many young adults who were surveyed for the making of this film. While many of them feel frustrated or tired with the CRC, they are still choosing to commit to it. They are willing to live with this tension, trusting that God will continue to work through them and through the denomination.

Notice too that one voice from the beginning of the film does not return at the end. This is, sadly, still a reality. Many young adults are not coming back to the CRC. What can your church do to help?

Discuss

1. What did you learn while watching this film?
2. Which scene was your favorite, and why?
3. If you could add one more scene to the film, what would it be? What perspective is missing from the film?
4. Share stories of young adults in your church who are passionate about committing to the church and making a positive difference.
5. Share stories of older adults in your church who are passionate about engaging young adults and making a positive difference.

Respond

1. Make a list of 2-3 steps that your church community can take to engage young adults more effectively.
2. Young adults: Make a list of 2-3 steps that you can take to engage your church more effectively.
3. Pray for your church and for the CRC denomination.