

MAKING SENSE OF VOCATION

How Young People Today Define and Discern Their Life's Purpose



We Are Springtide



Springtide Research Institute engages the power of social science to learn from and about young people ages 13 to 25. As a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, we deliver accessible research on the perspectives and experiences of the newest generations. Our empirical data amplify the voices of young people, inform those who know and serve them, and lead the way in showing what's next.

To learn more about us, check out the “About Us” page on our website: www.springtideresearch.org. Here you can read about our mission, our approach to research, and more.

About This Study



Springtide Research Institute conducted this mixed-methods study of young people, ages 13 to 25, in the US from February to August 2025. Springtide Research Institute secured informed consent for all participants, including parental consent for participants under the age of 18.

The survey component included two samples of young people ages 13 to 25 in the US: a nationally distributed online panel ($n = 2,946$), using a recruitment strategy guided by quotas to match census demographics for age, gender, region, and race/ethnicity, as well as a sample of students from Lasallian Catholic high schools ($n = 705$). The school sample allows for deeper insight into the experiences of young people with exposure to Catholic institutions and communities. To improve data quality from the online sample, Springtide Research Institute eliminated all identifiable phony and inattentive responses from the resulting dataset. The final dataset includes 3,651 respondents.

To provide additional context for the survey findings, Springtide Research Institute conducted in-depth interviews with 35 young people recruited through the survey and Catholic networks. Interviewees answered questions related to how they define vocation, who or what shapes their discernment process, and the language they use to describe their life's purpose. A team of researchers recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed interviews for themes.

See the full study methodology and full top-line results at here:
www.springtideresearch.org/vocation

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Foreword

Students often turn to teachers and mentors for help discovering what their gifts are and how those gifts might be lived out in service to others. While some of these conversations take place in formal settings, most seem to happen during the ordinary rhythms of school life—a conversation after class, a walk across campus, or a moment when a student shares something that matters deeply to them.

In these moments of encounter, we may notice a disconnect: the language we use does not always resonate with young people in the ways we expect. Prompting young people to reflect on their “vocation,” for example, may yield a different response than if we were to ask students what relationships, activities, or experiences make their lives feel “meaningful” or “fulfilling.”

This difference in language can make the work of vocational accompaniment challenging, but it also offers an invitation to get creative about how we engage in formation. To accompany young people well is to learn about their lived reality and start with their language, their questions, and their emerging sense of direction. Indeed, as this report shows, many young people already engage in the work of discernment. Most have some sense of direction, however tentative, and can point to experiences that stir hope, offer peace, and bring joy.

Those formed in the Lasallian tradition will recognize this approach to accompaniment. We know how important it is to meet students in the concrete realities of their lives and walk alongside them with intentionality and care. This report offers an opportunity for *all* educators to renew and ground our approach in a clear, empirical picture of how young people today understand and speak about their life’s purpose.

I encourage readers to approach this report not simply as a set of findings, but as a resource for practice. As you read, consider how a shift in language may foster deeper trust, where more attentive listening might reveal even faint stirrings of vocation, and how your presence can help young people grow into lives of meaning, purpose, and service.



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Introduction

The word “vocation” appears often in conversations about young people’s futures, yet people use the term in many different ways. “Vocation” may refer to a calling from a higher power, a particular path such as marriage or religious life, a career or profession, or a broader sense of meaning and purpose in life. While these meanings overlap, they do not always perfectly align. As a result, people who speak about “vocation” sometimes refer to different ideas without realizing it.

This ambiguity can create challenges for young people and those who accompany them. Educators, mentors, and ministers often encourage young people to discern their vocation, yet the language used in these conversations does not always match the words young people use to describe their heartfelt desires or hopes for the future. When different groups attach different meanings to the same term, conversations about vocation become unclear or confusing. People may believe they are discussing the same idea even as they approach the topic from different—even opposing—perspectives.

These dynamics raise several important questions:

- How do young people understand the purpose or direction of their lives?
- What language do they use to describe these aspirations?
- How do they discover or clarify that sense of purpose?
- And how, if at all, does the word “vocation” resonate with them?

This study addresses these questions from a social scientific perspective using survey and interview data. It also examines the role mentors, teachers, and other trusted adults play as young people reflect on their gifts and interests.

Throughout the report, we use the terms “vocation” and “life’s purpose” to refer to similar ideas: how young people understand the direction of their lives and the contributions they hope to make in the world. This approach reflects both the language commonly used in educational and faith-based contexts and the language young people use when they discuss who they are and what they think they are meant to do in life.

By listening closely and systematically to young people’s perspectives, this report aims to support more informed conversations about vocation and the role trusted adults can play in helping young people navigate questions of meaning and purpose.



Key Findings

1. Most young people already have some sense of their life's purpose.



Three-quarters (75%) say they have at least some idea of what their life's purpose is, including 20% who say they know it for certain.

2. Young people link purpose to relationships with others.

They most often describe their purpose as helping others, supporting family, and making a positive difference in the lives of people around them.

3. A sense of purpose emerges at the intersection of young people's talents, interests, relationships, and contribution.

Young people describe purpose as the alignment of what they care about, what they are good at, and how they hope to contribute to their communities.

4. Personal experiences strongly shape how young people imagine their future.

A large percentage say their own life experiences most significantly influence what they think they want to do in life.



5. Educators play a distinct role in vocational discernment.

Young people describe how teachers and mentors help them recognize their strengths, expand their sense of what is possible, and make meaning out of everyday experiences.

6. Financial and social pressures shape possibility.

Many young people feel tension between pursuing meaningful work and meeting expectations related to financial stability, family responsibility, and adult milestones.



7. Religion can make thinking about the future feel more hopeful.

Religious young people are more likely than nonreligious young people to say that reflecting on their future supports their mental health.



8. Young people rarely use the word "vocation."

Over half have heard of the term "vocation," but only 10% personally use it. Young people more commonly use terms like "purpose," "reason for being," or "life's mission."

How Young People Experience Vocation

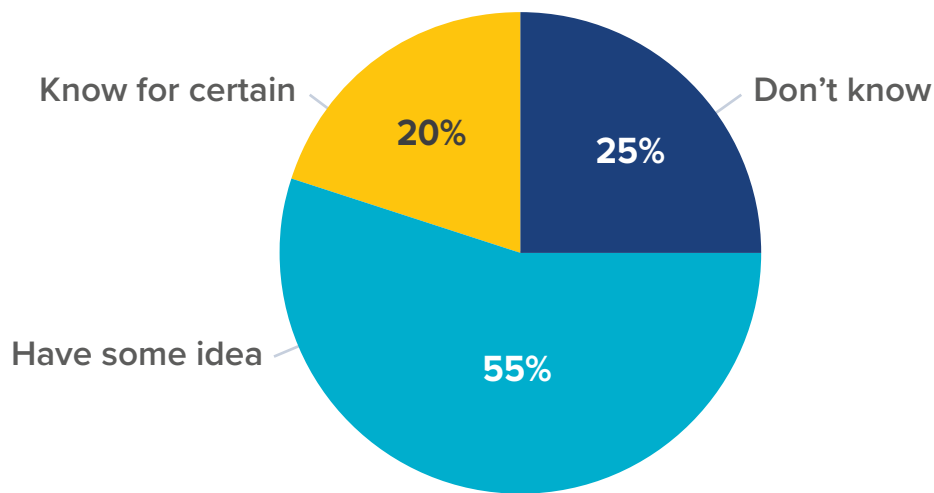
Young people speak about their life’s purpose as something that takes form over time through relationships, experiences, reflection, and the opportunities available to them. As they move through adolescence and early adulthood, young people begin to notice patterns in their lives and assign meaning to them, interpreting what those patterns communicate about who they are and what they are meant to do with their lives.

Drawing on both survey data from a national sample and in-depth interviews with Catholic and Catholic-connected young people (those who are connected to Catholic life through schools, families, or community networks), this section examines how young people experience vocation in their everyday lives. It first looks at how young people describe their life’s purpose in their own words. It then explores how that sense of purpose develops over time, focusing on the role of life experiences, relationships, and religious or spiritual influences. Finally, this section considers the pressures and constraints that shape the extent to which pursuing one’s vocation feels possible.

How do young people describe their vocation?

About half (55%) of young people say they have at least some sense of what their life’s mission or purpose is, and 20% say they know it for certain.

% of young people who say they _____ what their life’s purpose is:



Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

We asked respondents who say they have at least “some idea” what their life mission is to describe it in their own words. Because nearly 3,000 young people answered this open-ended survey question, we randomly selected 500 responses from the full set for closer analysis.



Note: This graphic reflects the most frequently used words in open-ended responses to the question “What do you think your life’s purpose is?” The size of the circles corresponds to the frequency with which their respective words appeared in the responses. Three-quarters (75%) of the respondents answered this question for a total of 2,716 short responses. The word count of individual responses ranged from 1 to 108 words. Only 500 responses are included in this analysis.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

Several patterns stand out in these responses. First, **young people frequently describe their life purpose in relational terms.** Words referring to other people (including “people,” “others,” “family,” and “children”) appear often, suggesting that young people find meaning and purpose in connecting with and caring for others.

Second, **many responses feature aspirational language, including words like “good,” “better,” and “believe.”** These words point to hopes for growth, direction, and making a positive impact. The frequency of words like “happy,” “love,” “enjoy,” and “feel” also suggest that young people see purpose as having an emotional dimension and impact.

To better understand how young people describe their sense of purpose, we examined these responses more closely, identifying several themes that appear across respondents’ descriptions:

1. Contribution

The most common way respondents describe their life’s purpose is in terms of helping or supporting other people. Many answers use straightforward language such as “help others,” “make an impact,” or “bring people happiness,” focusing on supporting those who are vulnerable or in need. Respondents often explain their purpose as connected to their unique gifts and talents (“it comes naturally to me”) or to the sense of satisfaction or fulfillment they experience in supporting others.

- “I believe my life mission and purpose is to help those who need it. I feel strongly in using one’s privilege to help the poor or underprivileged. I don’t like seeing people in pain or misfortune and I know that using my privilege to assist those who need it is my best shot at making the world a better place.”
- “I don’t completely know what my life’s purpose is yet. I just wanna help people.”
- “I think my life’s purpose is to help others and protect the innocent. I have a lot of empathy and I’m a babysitter so I think the best way to help others is by protecting children the most I can.”



Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

2. Relationships

A second prominent theme frames life's purpose in terms of family relationships and caregiving roles. Many respondents describe their purpose as building a strong family life or becoming a parent. These responses often reference long-standing or deeply held desires. As one respondent explains: "From the time I was little, I wanted to start a family and raise children."

- "I think [my purpose] has something to do with keeping my family connected."
- "I feel like my life's purpose is to break the generational curses from previous generations, to help the women in my family truly understand and value what it means and feels like to be accepted for who we are and also loving each other the right way."
- "I know my life's purpose is to help my family. They have done so much for me and I want to give them something back in return. Whether it be money, love, or a home, I want them to have as much stuff in payback for what I am doing now in the world."



of young people say that **seeking love through friendships or romantic partners** is "moderately" or "extremely" important to them.



of young people say that **nurturing children or a family** is "moderately" or "extremely" important to them.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

3. Abilities and Passions

A third group of young people connects their life's purpose to personal interests, talents, or abilities. These respondents explain their purpose in terms of activities they enjoy, skills they have developed, or areas they feel drawn toward. Some refer to interests that began early in life, while others describe talents they hope to continue developing.

- “I believe my purpose is to fulfill my interests and goals and feel like I’ve lived life to the fullest.”
- “I feel like my mission is to make a positive impact in the areas I love: art and books to be exact.”
- “To make music that other people can relate to and enjoy and share with their friends and maybe even pass down.”



86%

of young people say that it is “moderately” or “extremely” important for them to **continually learn and gain new skills.**



85%

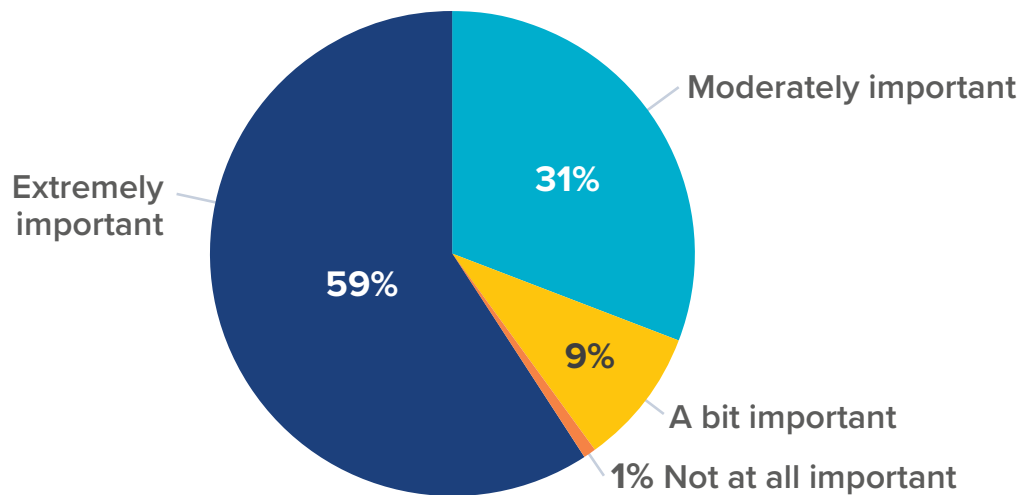
say that **embracing and honoring their true selves** is “moderately” or “extremely” important.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

4. Happiness and Wellbeing

An overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) say that, when thinking about the things that matter most in life, prioritizing their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing is “moderately” or “extremely” important to them.

% of young people who say prioritizing their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing is _____:



Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

Yet this focus is less prominent when young people describe their life’s purpose in their own words. When respondents do mention wellbeing, they usually prioritize happiness, fulfillment, or enjoying life, rather than mental or physical health *per se*. The desire to be happy often appears alongside relationships or broader life goals, such as happiness *with* others, or enjoyment as a way to honor the gift of one’s life.

- “I think [my purpose] is to obtain happiness and live life to the fullest.”
- “I think my life’s mission is to live a fulfilling and happy life that’s true to my values.”
- “I think my life’s mission is to just live and have fun. Enjoy what God brought us into.”

In our in-depth interviews with young people, we asked what it means to live a happy and fulfilling life. Respondents’ answers often return to the same themes that appear in the open-ended survey responses about life purpose. In their own words, a happy and fulfilling life tends to center service, loving relationships, and using one’s gifts to pursue work or activities one feels passionately about.

5. Vocation as a Sense of Alignment

When we examine the survey and interview data together, a clear pattern comes into view. Young people rarely describe their life's purpose as a single, defining goal—that is, as *only* serving others, *only* building relationships, *only* pursuing personal interests, and so on.

Instead, young people seem to identify purpose as the *alignment* of multiple elements: the gifts and talents they recognize in themselves, the needs they see around them, the relationships that matter most in their lives, and the activities or experiences that interest and motivate them. Jasleen, 16, for example, explains:

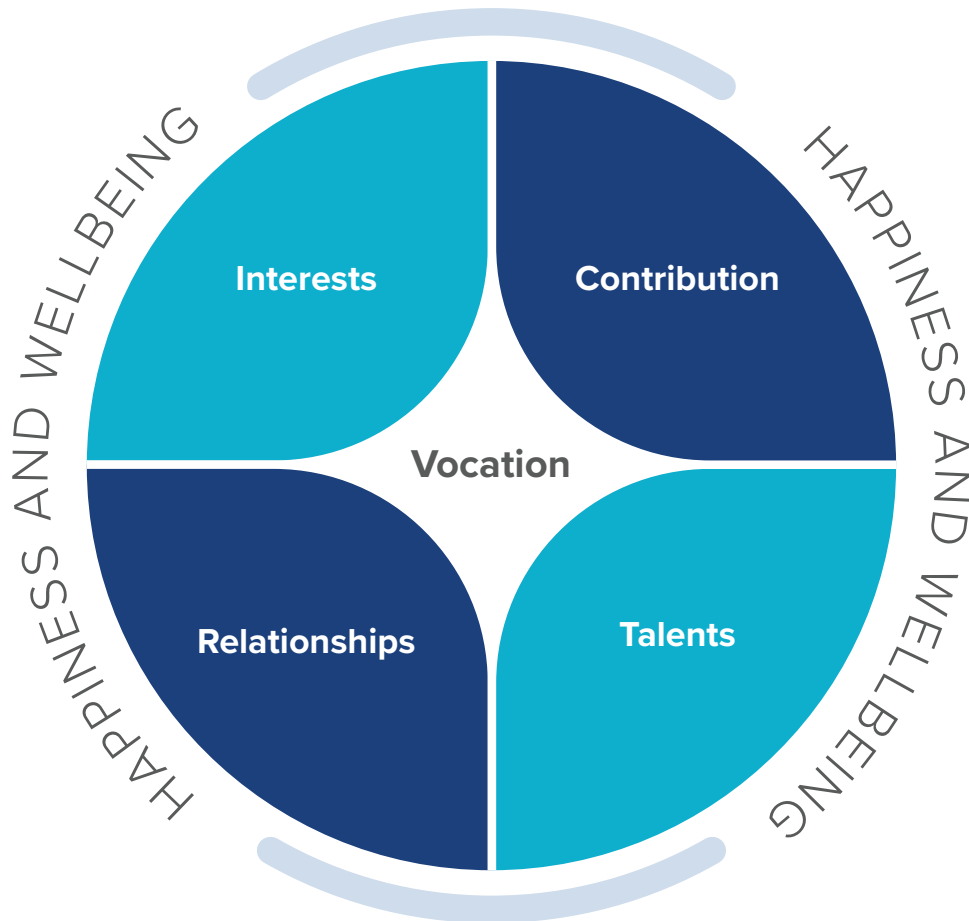
“ A person's dreams are always aligned with what they're sort of naturally good at.

And many, like Miharu, 17, describe that a sense of happiness, fulfillment, or wellbeing accompany this alignment. She says:

“ There's a specific talent or something that you can excel in—something that you can easily do that will help others. This connection is our vocation. I've learned that what comes easy to me is what will also fulfill me. That would be my vocation.



The figure below illustrates this pattern. **Vocation exists at the center where interests, relationships, contribution, and talents align.** Happiness, fulfillment, and wellbeing form the outer ring as the experiences young people describe when these elements come together.



How do young people discover their vocation?

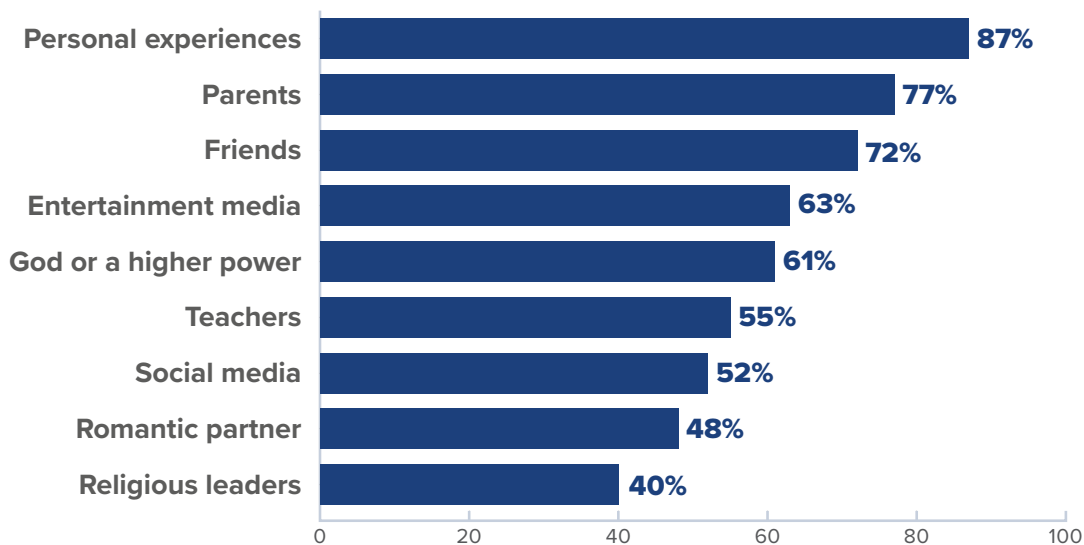
Interviews with young people reveal the gradual process of discovering one’s vocation. Vocation takes shape through experiences, relationships, and moments of reflection over time. Conversations with trusted adults, encounters with new opportunities, and the influence of peers or media can all play a role as young people consider what direction their lives should take.

When asked what has influenced their thinking about what they want to do in life, **young people most often point first to their own personal experiences**. A large majority (87%) say their personal experiences have “moderately” or “significantly” influenced their thinking about the future. According to our interview data, these experiences commonly include school activities, volunteer work, hobbies, internships, and even challenges or hardships.

Relationships also play an important role. Parents rank among the most influential voices in young people’s discernment, with 77% saying their parents have moderately or significantly shaped their thinking about what they want to do in life. Friends follow closely behind (72%), and teachers (55%) likewise play an important role. Almost half (48%) say a romantic partner has “moderately” or “significantly” influenced their thoughts about the future.

Beyond family and friends, **young people also look to cultural and institutional influences as they imagine their futures**. Entertainment media (63%) and social media (52%) shape how many young people think about what they want to do in life. These platforms expose young people to stories about careers, lifestyles, and social impact that can influence and expand what they see as possible.

% of young people who say _____ “moderately” or “significantly” influenced their thinking about what they want to do in life:

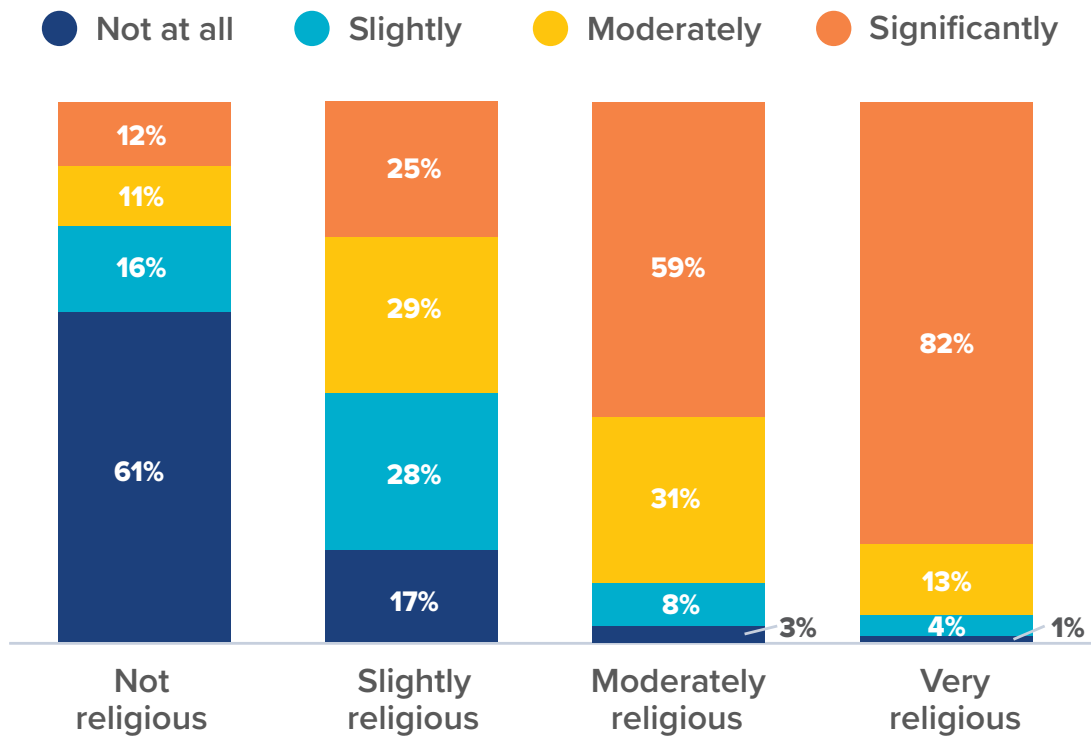


Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

Religious and spiritual influences also remain meaningful for many young people. Sixty-one percent of young people say God or a higher power has a “moderate” or “significant” influence on their thoughts about what they want in their future lives. This influence is especially pronounced among religious young people: more than three-quarters of those who say they are “very” religious say God or a higher power “significantly” influences what they want to do with their lives.

% of young people across levels of religiosity who say God or a higher power _____ influences their thinking about what they want to do in life:

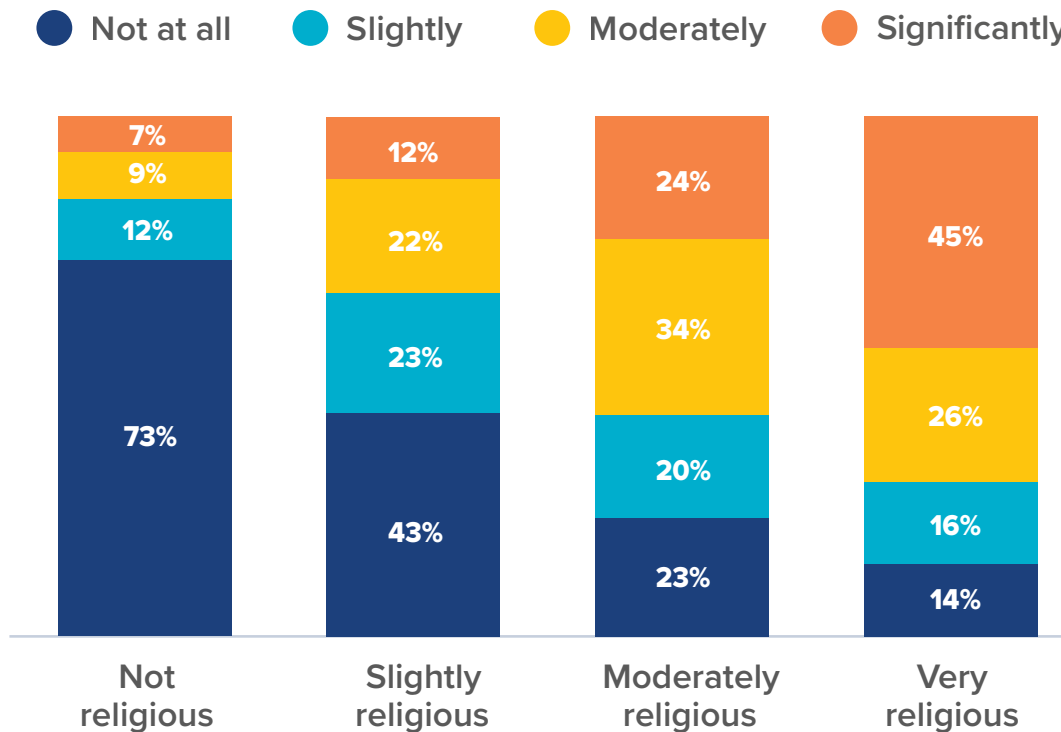


Note: This graph does not include respondents who chose the response "not applicable" (n = 192). Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

A smaller percentage of respondents (40%) say religious or spiritual leaders have a “moderate” or “significant” influence on their thinking about what they want to do in life. This, too, varies across levels of religiosity.

% of young people across levels of religiosity who say religious or spiritual leaders influence their thinking about what they want to do in life:



Note: This graph does not include respondents who chose the response "not applicable" (n = 251). Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

In the sections that follow, we look more closely at these three groups of influences: **life experiences, relationships and social support**, as well as **religion and spirituality**.

Life Experiences

Most young people (87%) say their own life experiences moderately or significantly influence how they think about what they want to do in life. This is true for young people across age, race, class, and gender. In interviews, young people describe how both major transitions and ordinary moments yield insight into who they are becoming and what a meaningful life might look like for them.



Major transitions, often prompt young people to reflect on and even reassess their lives.

As Laney, 19, explains, leaving her family and hometown to go to college gave her “a glimpse of what the real world is gonna look like.” This encounter with “the real world” helped her reshape her abstract interests into more grounded expectations for the future. Life changing experiences like Laney’s, going to college or starting a first job, can push young people to move from merely imagining ideas for the future to seeing how they might play out in everyday life.

Setbacks and obstacles can also shape discernment. Pilar, 22, for example, learned about her undocumented status while in high school, a discovery that initially left her discouraged as her peers began planning their futures. Reflecting on that period of time in her life, she recalls several moments of “serendipity,” including a college scholarship that arrived “just in time.” These experiences taught Pilar that she could “let go,” “just wait,” and trust that “something will pop up.” She now believes that, regardless of her status, there will always be a way for her to live out her life’s purpose.

Even during challenging times, many young people share stories where they encountered formative connection and care. In fact, **many young people share stories where they encountered connection and care in their everyday lives.** After fracturing her kneecap, Molly, 13, recalls how her physical therapist “really understood” her determination to recover and “helped me walk again.” Feeling seen and supported became the model for what she hoped to do for others: “That’s when I really found out that I wanted to be a physical therapist . . . they really changed how I see what I want to do.”

It is important to note, however, that young people’s sense of vocation often emerges through the interpretation of these experiences as much as through the experience itself. What may seem like a moment of sudden clarity usually involves a long process of reflection and meaning making. Levi, 24, describes discovering his sense of vocation through years of “reflection” and “self-tracking,” eventually realizing that “teaching high school is where I’m meant to be.” Over time, young people gather experiences, reflect on the connections between them, and use those reflections to construct a clearer sense of direction.

Relationships and Social Support

Parents and family often provide early frames of reference for what a meaningful life looks like. Several respondents describe feeling inspired by their parents’ vocational journeys. Laney, 19, for example, reflects on her father’s path from local politics to priesthood to chaplaincy. Hearing about how he navigated these changes, Laney says, made her feel freer to “throw things at a wall and see what sticks” in her own discernment. Pilar, 22, and Jasleen, 16, say their parents’ migration stories motivate them to live lives that make their parents’ sacrifices “worthwhile.”

Parents also influence how young people define what “success” and “purpose” mean in the first place. Several interviewees say their families taught them that success is about integrity and care for others rather than achievement alone. Alice, 17, says her “family life definitely influenced” her desire to serve, teaching her that “making a difference” in the lives of those in need is “what would make me truly happy and feel like I was being successful.”

When asked to name someone living a successful life, Nate, 15, names his parents and points—not to their careers—but to their family roles:

“ I just see ’em so happy with what they’re doing . . . not really as in their careers, but I mean as parents. Like, being someone’s spouse and being a mother and a father.

Yet family influence does not always appear as inspiration; sometimes it takes the form of contrast. Witnessing burnout, regret, or constrained opportunities motivated some interviewees to pursue alternative paths. Levi, 24, for example, reflects on his mother’s struggles with substance use. Watching her “fight demons” motivated him to build a different life for himself and his future family. Mateo, 17, shares a story about his mother, an artist, who now works in a different industry “to better support me and my family.” While he’s grateful for her sacrifice, his mother’s story is an example of what he doesn’t want his own life to become. Mateo hopes that, in his future, he is not so constrained by economic pressure that he cannot use his gifts in his everyday life. In this way, family experiences offer both positive models and cautionary tales.



Religious young people, teens (ages 13 to 17), and those from households with an above-average income are more likely to report that **parents influence their thinking about the future.**

Teachers and mentors also play a meaningful role in shaping young people’s discernment process. Over half (55%) of respondents say that teachers have moderately or significantly influenced their thinking about the future. Across interviews, three main patterns emerged in how teachers and mentors contribute to vocational discernment:

First, educators play a *formational* role when they help young people develop a clearer sense of self and confidence in their abilities. Many describe moments when a teacher or mentor recognized potential in them before they saw it in themselves. Jasleen, 16, for example, recalls a middle school mentor who “made me feel like I was smart for the first time.” Mateo, 17, had a drama teacher who nominated him for an acting award (which Mateo eventually won) telling him, “I’ll be seeing you on SNL in the next 20 years.”

Teachers also play an *aspirational* role by expanding students’ sense of what’s possible. Rachel, 20, a music student, describes how learning from successful songwriting professors made creative vocations seem within reach:

“It’s been really great to see people as teachers who have been successful to show that it is possible.”

Thomas, 21, recalls a high school teacher who left a lucrative law career for teaching, modeling a life oriented toward fulfillment rather than “making a ton of money.” Thomas reflects:

“He was willing to be so honest and show he’s doing this and why he enjoys it. I wanna be like him—somebody who I hope others can look up to one day.”

Finally, teachers play an *interpretive* role by giving students the language and frameworks to connect everyday experiences to larger questions of meaning and direction. Emma, 19, a student at a Catholic university, shares how her anatomy professor regularly invited students to consider how the topics in class connected to questions such as, “Why are we here and what is it leading to? What does anatomy mean in a vocational sense?” That approach helped her see vocation as something that “goes past a career or just going to school.”

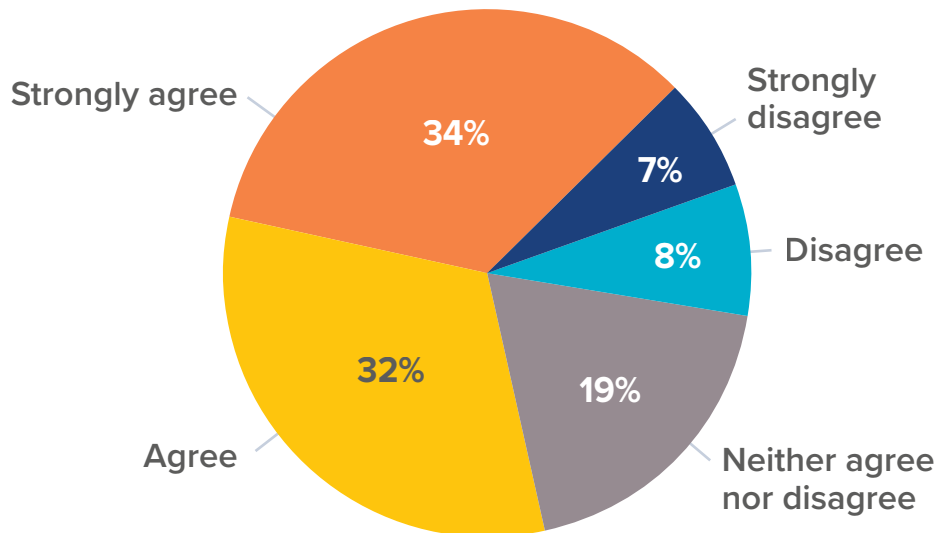
Miharu, 17, too, describes an impactful teacher, sharing that his classroom feels “like going on a retreat,” a space where reflection journals and personal feedback helped her begin to see the meaning hidden in ordinary life.



Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality also shape how many young people think about their life's purpose. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) agree or strongly agree that their life's purpose is connected to a higher power who leads them to pursue a good and true life.

% of young people who _____ that their life's mission is connected to a higher power who leads them to pursue a good life:



Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

In interviews, young people often describe this connection as a relationship. They speak of “talking to God,” “listening,” “feeling led,” or trusting in a divine plan for their lives. Laney, 19, describes God as “at the destination calling back to me,” while Miharū, 17, compares God’s guidance to someone “holding your pinky.”

At the same time, interviewees tend to see divine guidance as compatible with human freedom. Although many believe that God or a higher power has a plan for their lives, they also see that plan as responsive to the choices they make. Malachi, 14, explains:

“Since humans have free will, every time they choose something, God’s plan can change. His plan is adaptive to those kinds of changes.”

Discernment, in this sense, requires young people to be attentive and responsive to God or a higher power’s call.

Many respondents cultivate this attentiveness through regular spiritual practices.

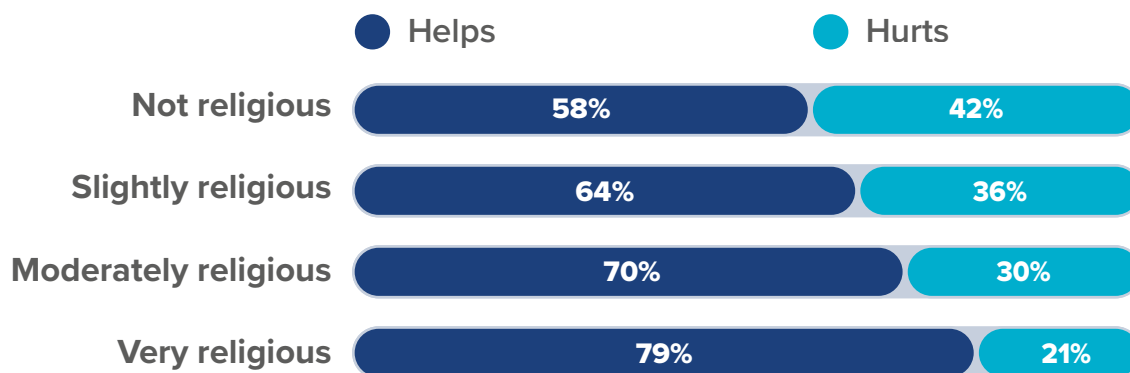
Interviewees note how prayer, journaling, and reflection offer them a space to notice patterns in their experiences and emotions. Eric, 14, enjoys going to the chapel with his class to “talk to God” who reminds him that “everything will be okay in the long run.” Thomas, 21, takes time throughout the day to “try to order my life with God’s will,” asking himself: “What is God calling me to next? What’s the story again? How can I try and get there?”

These practices and beliefs also shape how respondents approach uncertainty about the future. Questions about vocation can raise anxiety for some young people, especially those who feel caught between purpose and practical constraints. Yet many interviewees say their faith helps them approach these uncertainties with trust rather than control.

Bernadette, 22, explains that she tries “not to expect things but to let God work.” Angelica, 17, says she is learning to “trust that God knows what’s best and loves me a lot.” Andrew, 16, finds “peace and security” in remembering that his life ultimately centers on “serving God . . . even if I don’t know what I want to do.”

Survey findings affirm this pattern. **Respondents who identify as more religious are more likely to say that thinking about their future helps their mental health.** By contrast, nonreligious young people are more likely to say that thinking about their future *hurts* their mental health.

% of young people across levels of religiosity who say that thinking about the future _____ their mental health:

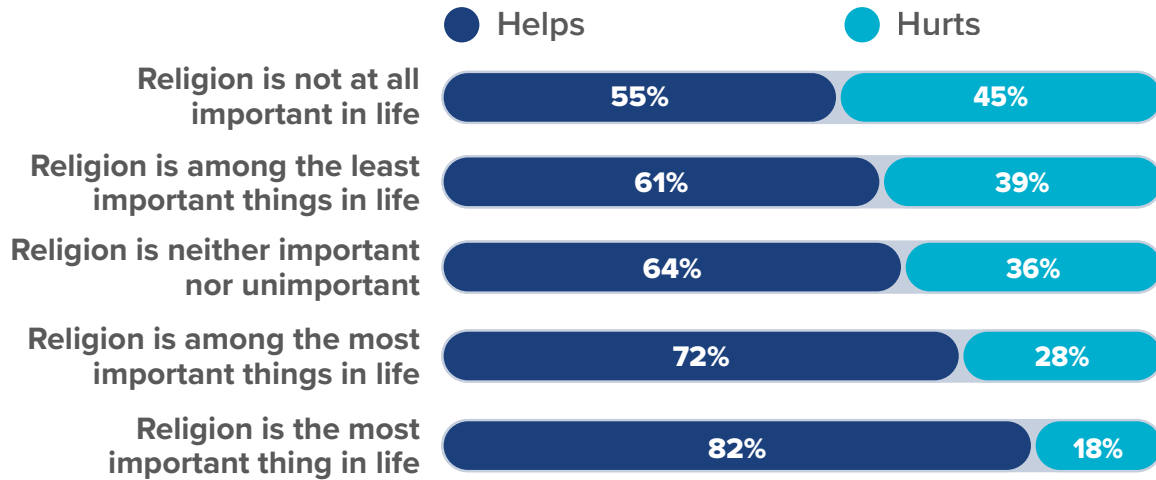


Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

This is true across various measures of religion, including religious salience and service attendance. For example, young people who say religion is more important in their lives report mental health benefits from thinking about the future.

% of young people across levels of religious salience who say that thinking about the future _____ their mental health:

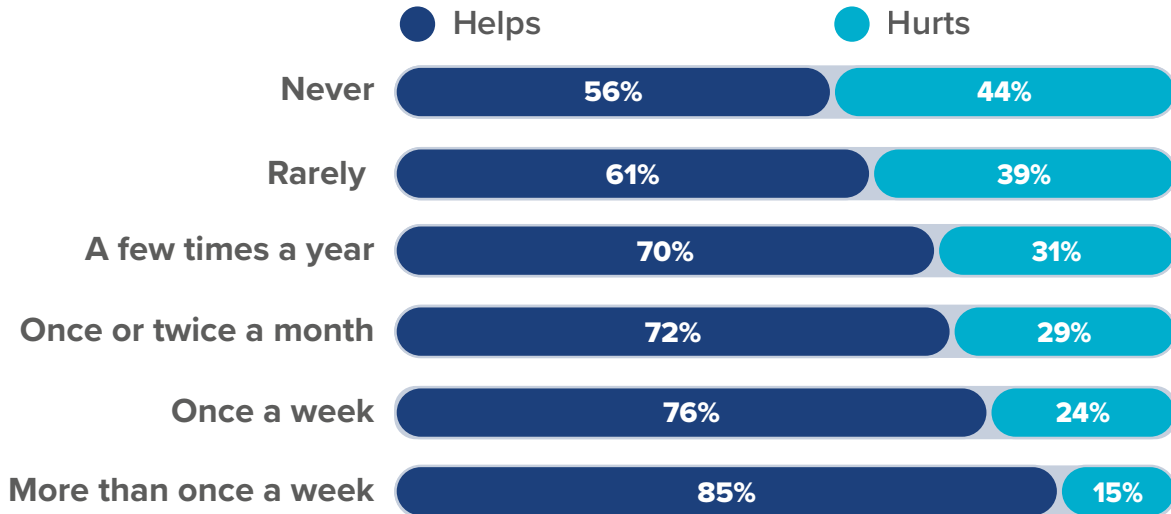


Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

And three-quarters (76%) of those who attend religious services weekly say that thinking about the future helps their mental health, compared to 56% of those who never attend.

% of young people across levels of religious attendance who say that thinking about the future _____ their mental health:



Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

This pattern suggests that religion may provide young people with a mentally healthy framework for approaching uncertainty about the future. As the interview data show, many religious young people interpret vocational discernment as part of an ongoing relationship with God or a higher power. Within this framework, young people may interpret uncertainty as part of a longer process of listening, reflection, and trust.

What pressures and constrains vocation?

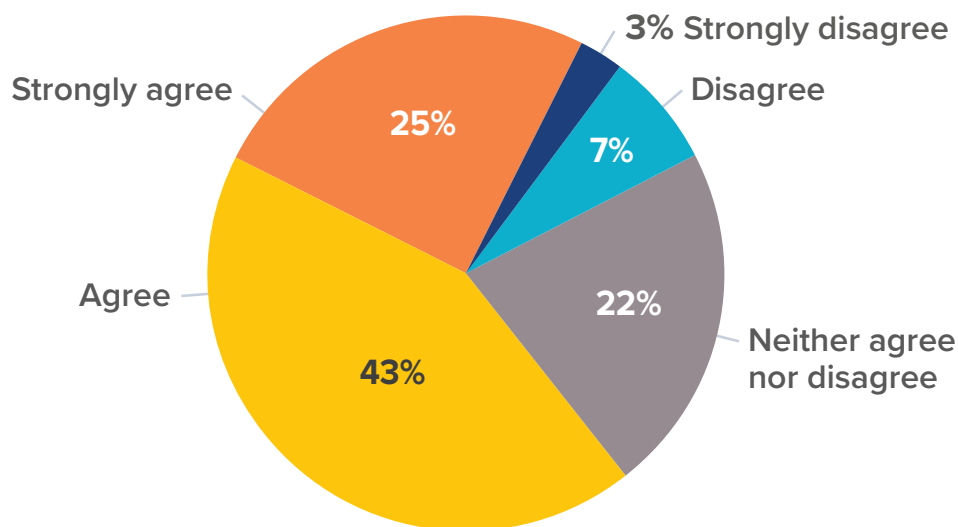
Many young people identify various pressures that they feel constrain their ability to freely pursue and live out their vocations. These pressures tend to fall into two broad and often overlapping categories: **financial concerns** and **societal expectations**.

Across the open-ended survey responses to the question “What do you think your life’s purpose is?”, explicit references to money or financial gain are infrequent, and words like “money,” “salary,” or “wealth” are uncommon. As previously noted (pages 11-12), respondents more often describe purpose in relational or contribution-oriented terms, such as helping others or pursuing meaning, connection, and personal growth.

Even in responses that *do* mention careers or professional aspirations, wealth is rarely the primary focus. Instead, young people tend to describe financial goals as a way to support family members or improve the lives of loved ones. One survey respondent explains her purpose as graduating and “making my parents’ life better than what they had,” while another connects professional success to being able to “provide much more for my children in the future.”

Still, it is worth noting that over two-thirds (68%) of respondents say that financially supporting their family is their top priority in life.

% of young people who _____ that financially supporting their family is their top priority in life:



Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

Financial concerns figure prominently in young people’s discussions about the challenges they face in pursuing their vocation. In fact, it is the most common response we heard from young people when we asked about their barriers to thinking about and planning for the future. Respondents describe concerns about paying for college, finding stable employment, and earning enough income to support themselves and their families. Many young people see these as conditions that could prevent them from pursuing what they believe to be their true vocations.

Interviewee Mateo, 17, captures this tension by acknowledging that “there are obviously times when you can’t do a job that follows your life’s purpose,” citing the pressure of student loan debt on college graduates. “You might have to get a job you don’t want,” he explains, “to slowly get money and support yourself,” he says. Miharū, also 17, says, “helping others [is] what makes me happy,” but she feels she must “take money into consideration.”

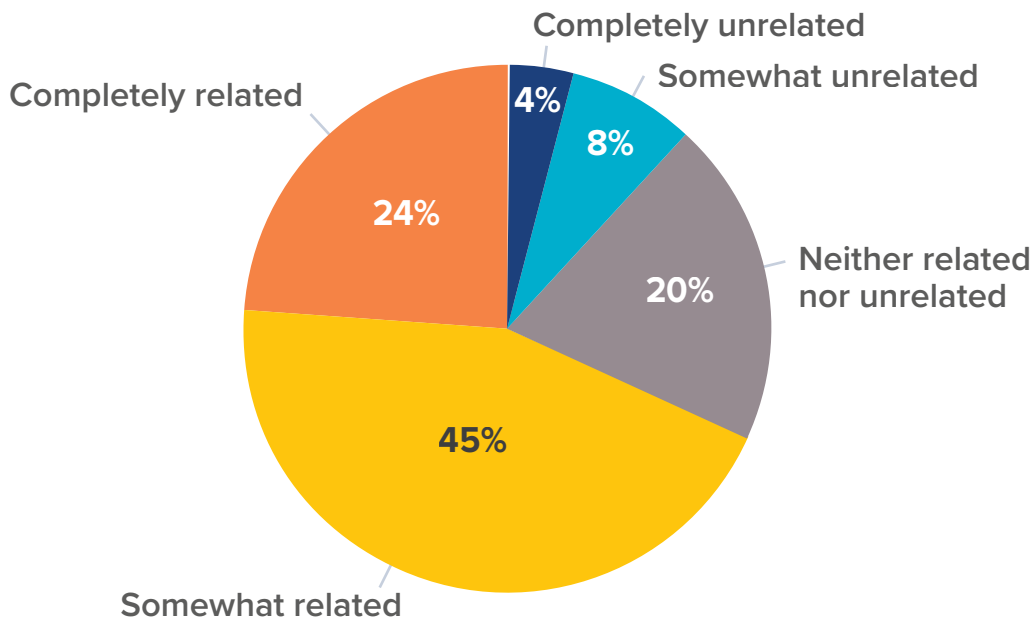


“ A lot of people are always thinking about, “Oh, this is what I’m passionate about, so I’m gonna follow this.” But you also have to think about the people around you: Are my parents making up money so that they’re gonna be comfortable when they’re retired? Or am I gonna have to provide for that?
— Andrew, 16

Many young people hope to find some connection between vocation and work. Indeed, about two-thirds of respondents (68%) say their life’s mission is at least somewhat related to their career aspirations. These findings suggest that many young people expect some overlap between vocation and work, even as they recognize that practical constraints may limit how closely the two align.

Young people from **higher-income backgrounds** are more likely than young people from lower-income households to say their life's mission is completely related to their career aspirations.

% of young people who say that their life's purpose is _____ to their career aspirations:



Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.



In addition to financial pressures, many young people describe how **social expectations** shape how they think about their life purpose. For example, 42% of respondents say they feel pressure to pursue the kind of life their parents want for them. And almost half (48%) say they sometimes feel they must hide certain parts of themselves in order to fit society's standards.

% of young people responding responding _____ to each statement:

● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree

I feel pressure to pursue the kind of life that my parents want for me.



I feel the need to hide certain parts of my identity to fit in with society's standards.



Note: This graph consolidates response categories (e.g., “strongly disagree” and “disagree”) for clarity. Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

Yet even these social pressures often reflect underlying economic concerns. In interviews, young people frequently describe feeling tension between pursuing what they feel passionate about and meeting expectations related to financial stability. Several interviewees explained that their parents' hope for their future is closely tied to concerns about secure employment, a stable income, or avoiding financial hardship.

Rachel, 20, for example, is a singer-songwriter whose parents “want their daughter to have a job and be able to sustain herself on her own.” When Jordan, 22, decided to study psychology instead of engineering, the major his parents would have liked for him to pursue, his parents “warned” him that he would not “be making as much money.” They eventually supported his decision, “as long as you're able to pay the bills, put a roof over your head, clothes on your back, and things like that.”

Similarly, when respondents described pressures to meet society’s standards, these expectations often took the form of financial milestones that respondents associated with adulthood. Interviewees spoke about the importance of earning enough money to move out of their parents’ homes, support themselves independently, or eventually save for a house and family of their own. Indeed, almost half (48%) of young people feel pressure to achieve milestones like these by a certain age.

% of young people responding _____ to the statement:

● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree

I feel pressure to achieve certain life milestones by a certain age.



Note: This graph consolidates response categories (e.g., “strongly disagree” and “disagree”) for clarity. Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

These findings highlight some of the constraints and pressures young people experience as they engage in the process of discernment. As the data show, financial concerns and responsibility shape many of their thoughts and decisions about the future. Very few respondents describe “wealth” as their ultimate goal in life, but many do express a desire to establish financial stability—often, for the sake of their future families. Young people also express feeling social pressure to achieve particular milestones by a certain age. When financial considerations turn into financial *anxiety*, young people worry about whether they will be able to live out their life’s purpose at all. While some hope to find fulfillment through work, others feel they must find meaning outside of their “9 to 5.”

From Insight to Practice: Helping Young People Discover Their Vocation

What the research shows

Our interviews suggest that young people gradually develop a sense of vocation as they begin to interpret how their experiences, talents, and relationships fit together. Teachers, mentors, and organizational leaders often play a key role in this process by asking thoughtful questions and naming patterns they observe.



What practitioners can do

1. Treat experiences as data



Young people encounter many everyday moments with vocational significance, including successes, failures, and transitions. What they often need is help noticing patterns. You can try asking questions like:

- “What stands out to you about that experience?”
- “Have you noticed anything similar showing up in different parts of your life?”
- “What might that moment reveal about what matters to you or where your strengths lie?”

2. Move young people away from evaluation

Many young people spend time worrying whether a decision is the “right choice” or whether they have made a “mistake.” Helping them shift their focus from evaluation to introspection may reduce anxiety and invite them into a deeper level of reflection. You can try helping young people reframe these moments of reflection by shifting from:

- “Did this work out?” to “What did you learn about yourself through this?”
- “Was this a failure?” to “What did this experience clarify or complicate for you?”



What practitioners can do

3. Reflect what you see before offering direction



Several respondents shared how trusted adults helped them see themselves or their lives more clearly. By naming strengths, values, or recurring themes, trusted adults help young people recognize patterns they may not yet have articulated and assign meaning to experiences that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. Reflective practices may include:

- Naming specific strengths you observe:
“I notice how consistently you show up for others. Not everyone is gifted in that way.”
- Reflecting language back to them: “I’m hearing that ‘helping people feel seen’ is something you feel passionately about.”
- Point out patterns across experiences:
“Several of the stories you’ve shared involve bringing people together. What do you make of that?”





The Language of Vocation

What terms do young people use?

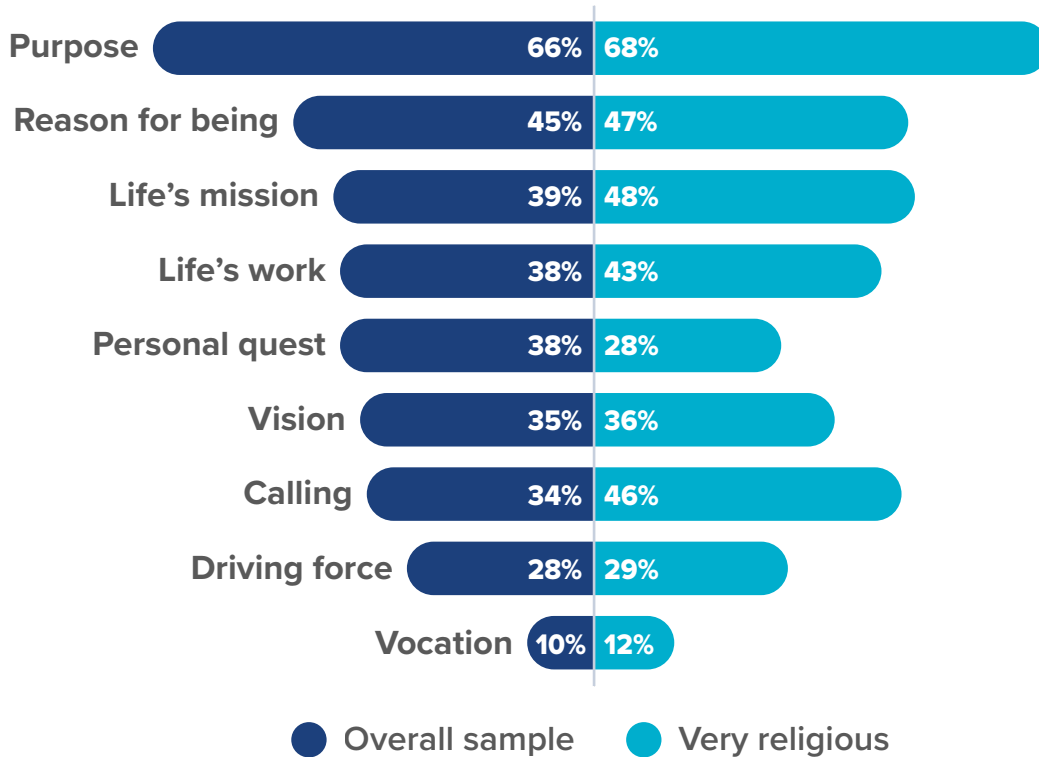
While the previous section examined how young people understand, discover, and describe their vocation, this section turns to a different question: how do young people *name* the idea of vocation itself?

When asked which words or phrases they personally use to discuss vocation, “purpose” emerges as the most commonly selected term (66%), followed by “reason for being,” (45%) “life’s mission,” (39%) “personal quest,” (38%) “vision,” (35%) and “calling” (34%).



Some of the terms young people use for vocation vary across levels of self-reported religiosity. Young people who describe themselves as “very” religious are more likely than their less religious peers to use the terms “calling” and “life’s work.” They are somewhat *less* likely to use the term “personal quest.”

% of young people who use the word _____ to describe their vocation:

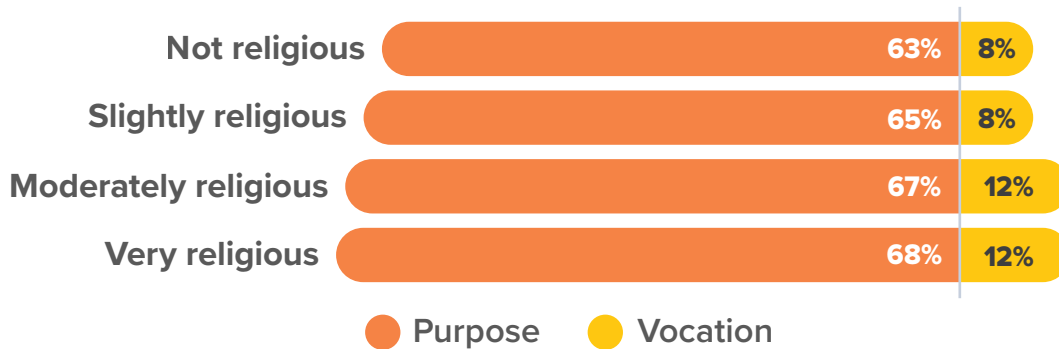


Note: Respondents could choose all that apply and write in a term of their own. Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

Other terms appear across levels of religiosity. About two-thirds of respondents in every group—from those who say they are not religious to those who describe themselves as “very” religious—use the term “purpose.” Use of the term “vocation” is low overall, with no meaningful differences across religiosity.

% of young people who use the word _____ to describe their vocation:

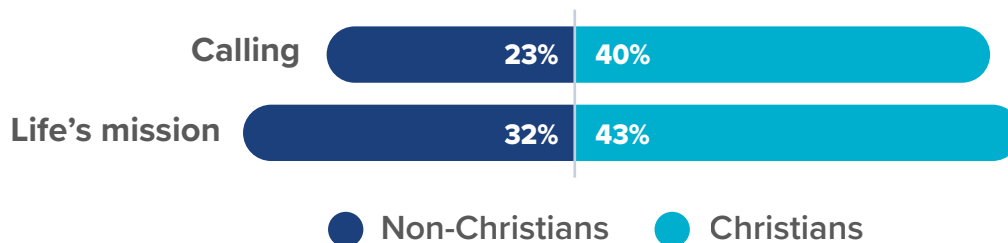


Note: Respondents could choose all that apply and write in a term of their own. Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

Looking at religious identity, both Christian and non-Christian respondents alike use terms like “reason for being,” “purpose,” “vocation,” and “personal quest.” Christian respondents are, however, somewhat more likely than non-Christians to use the terms “life’s mission” and “calling.”

% of young people who use the word _____ to describe their vocation:



Note: Percentages are approximate due to rounding. Please see the study topline for precise wording and responses.

Source: 2025 Springtide Research Institute Study of Young People & Vocation (n = 3,651), ages 13 to 25, conducted between February and April 2025.

What do these words mean to young people?

Survey responses show which terms young people recognize and use, but they reveal less about how these words are understood. To explore this further, we asked interviewees about *why* they use particular terms and how they interpret other terms we included in the survey. The interview data provide additional context about where young people encounter this language, what meanings they attach to it, and how it shapes the way they approach thinking about the future.

The table below helps visualize the differences across some of these terms, meanings, and associations we identified from our in-depth interviews with young people:

Term	Tone	Meaning emphasis	Common associations	Context used
<i>Vocation</i>	Formal, institutional	Role, alignment of talents and service	Career, trades, religious vocations, ministry, teaching	Faith-based spaces, religion class
<i>Calling</i>	Emotional, intuitive	Inner pull, divine plan	A higher power, purpose, or direction	Faith-based spaces, family, personal reflection
<i>Purpose</i>	Broad, existential	Meaning and fulfillment	Identity, “why,” contribution	General and secular contexts, personal reflection
<i>Life’s mission</i>	Action-oriented	Direction, talents, and characteristics	Service, outreach, impact	Faith-based spaces
<i>Ambition/ Goals</i>	Pragmatic, secular	Desire and achievement	Success, drive, milestones	Peers, school settings, personal reflection

Interviewees describe how **the words they and others use to talk about vocation inform their sense of choice and responsibility**. Some terms emphasize planning and effort, while others require one’s patience or trust in a higher power. The differences between such terms carry implications for how empowered or hesitant young people may feel to take a step toward their vocation.

We find that when young people use language like “ambitions” or “goals,” for example, they tend to experience the future as something they can actively work toward. Interviewee Jasleen, 16, explains that she often uses the word “target” when thinking and planning for her future because it allows her to set benchmarks and measure her progress over time: “I always think of every month or day or year in sprints or targets . . . little checkpoints of where I wanna be at.”

For her part, Rachel, 20, shares that she prefers the term “goal” to “dream” because goals feel achievable:

“Dream” has the connotation of, like, “Oh, this is so far away,” . . . but I think of what I’m doing as a “goal” because I’ve proven to myself and to other people that I’m in this for the long haul.

Where words like “goal” emphasize personal choice and effort, **terms like “calling,” “purpose,” and “life’s mission” relocate some responsibility beyond the self**, whether it is a higher power, destiny, or another sense of external guidance. These terms frame vocation as something that young people must actively receive and respond to. It requires ongoing listening, attunement, and collaboration.

Asked how young people can discover their vocation, Miharu, 17, says:

Pray—God will always provide. Ask him, “Please, I need some guidance now. What should I do?” You ask him, and he’ll give you a sign. There’s plenty of signs as long as you listen, and you’re a little open to it.

Thomas, 21, explains that he often asks himself: “What do you think God wants from you?”

Young people who use the term “calling” often describe a sense of trust that their life has direction even when the specific path is still unclear. “I’m still trying to figure things out . . . but God has a plan for me and whatever plan that is, it’s gonna happen and it’s gonna be perfect,” says Laney, 19.

For others, however, “calling” introduces uncertainty by depicting vocation as something that manifests itself in unmistakable terms. In fact, several young people recounted stories they heard from parents or teachers whose calling appeared suddenly and unequivocally. Some interpret the absence of that kind of clarity as a sign that they are not being called at all. Anna, 18, ponders:

Some people are called vocationally . . . But I don’t think everyone gets that. I don’t think I’ve gotten anything.



When asked about the word “vocation,” many young people share that the term feels serious, formal, or outdated. “A vocation . . . you’re burdened to do it. You’re tasked to do it,” explains Mateo, 17. Laney, 19, says she mostly hears it “from older generations” while Julieta, 17, describes “vocation” as a “very religious” term. “It’s a little ‘cringe’ when people say ‘vocation,’” shares Michael, 20.

Many interviewees associate the term “vocation” with religious vocations (i.e., becoming a priest) or vocational trades (i.e., becoming an electrician). Others say the term “vocation” is synonymous with the term “career.” These associations point to futures that are well defined (clear roles, training pathways, and endpoints), require a great deal of commitment and certainty at the outset (a decision that must be made early and adhered to), and may be difficult to reverse (socially, financially, or morally). For many young people, particularly those still exploring their identities and interests, this makes talking or thinking about vocation feel premature. “I don’t know what my vocation is yet. I’m still trying to figure that out . . . I’m pretty young,” explains Brooklyn, 16.

Several interviewees add qualifiers or temporal markers to prevent their ideas from becoming too rigid or final:

“ This is what I think *right now* . . .

“ I think I’m *kind of* called to . . .

“ I don’t know if this is *supposed to be* my vocation, but . . .

What makes the term “vocation” intimidating for some young people is the same thing that makes it meaningful for others. Thinking about vocation as something serious or formal can offer direction, and the idea that there is a well-defined path can reduce the emotional burden of evaluating an infinite number of choices. For young people who feel overwhelmed by options, or those longing for meaning or structure, this view of vocation may make the future feel grounding rather than constraining.

Michael, 20, says:

“ I tend to conflate “vocation” with “purpose” or “meaning,” like, what was I put on the planet to fulfill? So, in that sense you can’t really have more than one purpose, ‘cause by definition it is ultimate.

Michael’s understanding of “vocation” as “ultimate” offers an antidote to the fact that, in his view, people “drift” through life passively “allowing life” to happen instead of acting with intention.

Nevertheless, **words and phrases that signal flexibility tend to reduce anxiety about the future by framing vocational discernment as meaningful and nonlinear.** Terms like “calling” and “purpose” or phrases like “what you’re meant to do” allow young people to talk about the things that matter most to them without requiring certainty. This kind of language frames vocation as dynamic and evolving. In fact, respondents often define these terms in ways that suggest motion and vitality, using words like “pull,” “push,” “drive,” “compel,” “alive,” “fire,” and “motivate.”



“

My purpose is what drives me. It’s the very focal point of my happiness and my enthusiasm in life.

—Mateo, 17

“

Vocation is what you wanna do, but purpose is what makes you wanna wake up each day and get out of bed. What makes you have the will to live, basically.

—Henry, 16

Michael, 20, shares: “In my ideal state, I’d be waking up for a purpose and being proactive and having a say on how my future looks. So, I’d feel energized. I’d feel a sense of inner peace and security.”

By emphasizing direction over resolution, terms like “call,” “purpose,” and “life’s mission” communicate to young people that it is normal for the process of discernment to raise as many questions as it does answers.

From Insight to Practice: Choosing Language That Invites Vocational Reflection

What the research shows

Many young people share that they enjoy thinking about the meaning and purpose of their life. Yet the language that adults use to *frame* those questions can significantly impact how conversations about these topics turn out. Our interviews with young people reveal how different words or phrases can imply certainty or finality, which can raise the stakes and make reflection feel intimidating for some. By contrast, language that depicts discernment as an ongoing exploration can make thinking about the future seem exciting. Teachers, mentors, and organizational leaders can support discernment by choosing words that prompt curiosity and minimize the pressure to gain absolute clarity before taking a next step.

What practitioners can do

1. Match the language to the moment

No two young people are in the same place in the discernment process. Open-ended language may be especially helpful for those just starting out. Consider the difference between thinking about “where your heart is pulling you right now” compared to “what the purpose of your life might be.” For young people at the start of their discernment journeys, paying attention to the little things that bring joy or peace is a great first step. For those who already have a solid grasp on these, considering their “life’s mission” may feel less daunting.

Especially in early conversations, try asking:

- ➔ “What feels meaningful in your life these days?”
- ➔ “What kinds of things make you feel most alive?”
- ➔ “What kind of future do you feel drawn toward right now?”



What practitioners can do

2. Frame uncertainty as part of the process

Words like “vocation” can sound as if clarity should already exist. Framing uncertainty as a normal part of discernment may help young people stay open to what life’s opportunities and challenges communicate about who they are and what a fulfilling life might look like for them.

Naming the process may sound like:

- “Most people discover these things gradually through experience and reflection.”
- “Paying attention to what matters now and what continues to matter over time is how clarity eventually forms.”
- “Almost everyone revises their sense of purpose as they grow and learn new things.”

3. Distinguish between direction and decision

Many respondents easily identify what brings them peace, what gets them out of bed in the morning, and what inspires them to make a positive change in the world. About as many, however, say they sometimes feel too nervous to make plans for their future and confidently set off in that direction. In fact, hesitancy around decision-making prevents some young people from taking a step in *any* direction. Interviewees who felt they had no sense of direction tended to express feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, and low self-esteem.

Other young people, by contrast, felt they could start walking in a particular direction and “course correct” as needed. Taking those initial first steps was often critical to figuring out what direction they really needed to go.

You may try helping young people distinguish between direction and decision by sharing:

- “You don’t need to know exactly where this leads yet to notice what keeps drawing your attention.”
- “Sometimes direction becomes clear before the final decision does.”
- “What’s a small step you can take in that direction now? How did it feel to start moving in that direction?”



Conclusion



Some young people express a great deal of clarity about who they are and what a meaningful, fulfilling life would look like for them. They can name, with ease, the things that both energize them and bring them peace. They have spent time reflecting on what their experiences and observations reveal about the world and their place in it. Many have trusted adults who help them deepen these reflections and feel confident enough to take the next step. These young people sense that there may be roadblocks or challenges along the way, but they believe that things will ultimately work out—this is what they are *meant* to do, and opportunities will undoubtedly open along the way.

Other young people are not so sure. The thought of pursuing something while feeling the weight of financial responsibilities, social expectations, and structural barriers can feel overwhelming. Some are still trying to understand what makes them unique or in what ways they are gifted. Doubts cloud the way, and every path threatens to be the “wrong” one. A life of meaning and purpose can feel out of reach.

Regardless of where they are in their discernment journey, young people often want many of the same things. Many express a shared desire to use the gifts and talents they have to live good lives with and for others. They describe purpose as something that exists at the intersection of these elements: in their gifts, interests, relationships, and potential contributions to the world. Teachers, mentors, and organizational leaders play an important role in helping young people name these elements, make sense of them, and see how they might come together in a coherent way.

This report also highlights the importance of language in conversations about meaning and purpose. Educators, ministers, and mentors often speak about “vocation,” while young people more commonly talk about “purpose,” “reason for being,” or “life’s mission.” Our interviews show how these terms shape the accessibility and direction of these discussions. The words we choose can influence whether a young person decides to share their stories with us. How we frame vocation can also shape how they approach and engage the discernment process. That process can be fruitful, exploratory, and joyful, but it can also be confusing or anxiety-inducing. Language often sets the tone.

By examining both the language young people use and the contexts that shape their thinking about the future, this study offers a more complete picture of how young people understand, experience, and speak about vocation. We hope these insights support educators, mentors, and other trusted adults as they accompany young people in making sense of vocation.

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