

Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

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Emerging Adulthood & Faith Formation

- 3 Faith and Spirituality among Emerging Adults
Penny Edgell
- 9 Religion & the Millennial Generation: Insights from the Latest Research
Pew Research Center
Marist College Institute for Public Opinion
- 14 Religious Trajectories from the Teenage Years into the Emerging Adult Years
Christian Smith with Patricia Snell and Kyle Longest
- 28 Young Adults in a Changing Church
Shannyn Magee
- 38 Emerging Adult Participation in Congregations
Conrad Hackett
- 45 Faith Formation with Emerging Adults: Congregational Practices
- 57 Resources: Emerging Adulthood & Faith Formation



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Emerging Adulthood & Faith Formation

Lifelong Faith

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Next Issue
Children's Faith
Formation

The Rise of Emerging Adulthood

Welcome to Spring 2010 issue of *Lifelong Faith* with the theme of “Emerging Adulthood & Faith Formation.” There is a new and important stage in life—what scholars call “emerging adulthood”—situated between the teenage years and full-fledged adulthood, which has emerged in our culture in recent decades and is reshaping the meaning of self, youth, relationships, and life commitments as well as a variety of behaviors and dispositions among young adults.

Studies agree that the transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing than it was in past decades. For most American youth, the period between high school graduation day and the eventual settling down with career, spouse, children, and house offers them a very long stretch of time in which they have to figure out life. For many, it is marked by immense autonomy, freedom of choice, lack of obligations, and focus on the self. It is also normally marked by high instability, experimentation, and uncertainty. It is not clear how much emerging adults rely in this life stage on the religious faith and beliefs with which they were raised.

This issue of *Lifelong Faith* is focused on understanding emerging adulthood and religion from a number of perspectives. **Penny Edgell** writes about “Faith and Spirituality among Emerging Adults” and **Conrad Hackett** about “Emerging Adult Participation in Congregations.” Both essays are part of the Changing Spirituality in Emerging Adulthood project (see www.changingsea.org). In an abridged version of Chapter Eight in *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, **Christian Smith** with Patricia Snell and Kyle Longest write about their continuing research through the National Study on Youth and Religion. This essay focuses on “Religious Trajectories from the Teenage Years into the Emerging Adult Years.” I found this to be the most important chapter in their excellent book, which I believe is must-reading for everyone. **Shannyn Magee**, a young adult herself and a Lutheran pastor, shares her reflections on research she conducted on the faith and religious practice of young adults. In the final essay, I provide potential directions for faith formation with emerging adults drawn from research studies and a survey of congregations that are engaging emerging adults.

I hope you find the variety of articles helpful in understanding emerging adulthood and the challenges and opportunities for congregational faith formation. You can purchase additional copies by going to our online store at www.LifelongFaith.com. For prices on quantity orders, write me at jroberto@lifelongfaith.com

John Roberto, Editor



Faith and Spirituality among Emerging Adults

Penny Edgell

“**T**he religious landscape of the United States is in a period of long-term, fundamental transformation, and all of the evidence suggests that today’s emerging adults will provide a catalyst that accelerates this transformation. Since 1990, the percentage of Americans who claim no religious identity has more than doubled, from 7% to 15%. There is a focus on spirituality—as a way of talking about experiences of connection and transcendence, as a way to designate a wide-ranging set of practices used to connect with the sacred, and as an expression of a critical distance from organized religion. At least 20% of Americans identify as “spiritual and not religious,” and over 40% identify as both spiritual and religious. There has been a reaction against the recent politicization of religion; the “culture wars” have caused some Christians to turn away from their religious identity altogether, and surveys show a new preference for more distance between religious leaders and politics.

All of these trends are important—and all of them are concentrated among younger cohorts of Americans, especially those 35 and below. However, it is also important to understand that these trends build on and extend changes begun by the Boomer generation, especially the emergence of a new, individual-expressive style of religious commitment. Furthermore, the transformations brought about by Boomers and their children, today’s emerging adults, are best understood as a set of variations on the core themes that have characterized American religion throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—especially its pragmatism, moralism, and voluntarism. The religiosity of today’s emerging adults may well cause changes in American religious institutions, but there is continuity, as well as change, in their religious and spiritual lives.

Penny Edgell, Ph.D. is professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota and author of *Religion and Family in a Changing Society* (Princeton University Press, 2005). Dr. Edgell’s work on the National Survey of Religion and Family Life focuses on the support that religious communities and networks provide for managing work and family life across different racial and socio-economic contexts. She is also working on the American Mosaic project, a study of how Americans make sense of racial, religious, and other forms of diversity in American life.

(This article is reprinted with permission from the *Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults Project*, a Lilly Endowment project to conduct research on young adults both in and out of churches, and then communicate that research to ministry practitioners in helpful ways. www.changingsea.org.)

A New Focus on Emerging Adults

Social scientists know a great deal about American religion—its history, how it is organized, and the character of its major institutions. We also understand religious commitment in the United States. In general, being married, having children, being female, having more education, and having had a mother who was herself religiously active all make it more likely that a given adult will attend church, pray regularly, or engage in other spiritual practices. In fact, these factors taken together, along with race and employment status, explain well over 40% of the variation in individual church attendance—a figure that is extremely high when it comes to predicting the chaotic and idiosyncratic behavior of individuals. We have known far less about the faith and spirituality of emerging adults, but important new research allows us to describe young adults' religious involvement and compare it to that of other adults today and to the religious involvement of earlier generations.

Especially important is the recent research, based on good national datasets, of two sociologists: Robert Wuthnow, who focuses on religion and spirituality among Americans who are younger than 45, and Christian Smith, who analyzes the religious and spiritual lives of Americans from 18 to 23 years of age. Largely because of their research, along with some other studies of young adulthood, we now know that emerging adults experience and practice religious faith and spirituality differently than do other adults today. Moreover, they are different than their parents were, and it is this historically distinct approach to faith and spirituality, and the possibility that it will lead to different lifelong trajectories of religious involvement, that raises the question of whether emerging adults will cause the next set of major changes in religious institutions in the United States.

Pragmatic, Moral, Therapeutic

In general, religion in the United States is a matter of private choice. There is no state-mandated religion, and the overarching trend of the late twentieth century has been toward increasing

tolerance of religious pluralism. Because religion in the United States is voluntary, pluralistic, and culturally rich, it has flourished, for much of American history, as a basis for expressing group-based social identities, especially for new immigrants, but also for Americans of color. To borrow and update an idea from the midcentury social philosopher Will Herberg, to be Mexican Catholic, or Korean evangelical, or a member of the Black Church are simply different ways to be American. Moreover, religious involvement was widely understood for much of the 19th and 20th centuries to be an expression of civic engagement and national identity; the United States has been understood as culturally, if not officially, Christian.

Some religious groups have emphasized strong boundaries and doctrinal rigor, but by and large, the overall tenor of American religiosity has been a kind of pragmatic moralism, or what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls “Golden Rule Christianity.” In a famous study of Muncie, Indiana (or “Middletown”), sociologist Theodore Caplow found a pragmatic “common creed” religiosity that emphasized the importance of treating others well, of believing in heaven and that good people go there when they die, of prayer and good works. Today's emerging adults very much share this pragmatic, nondoctrinal, and moralistic approach to religion, with one additional dimension.

Emerging adults have what some would call a therapeutic orientation, a sense that religious involvement is a good thing to do if it makes you feel good about yourself or if it expresses an important part of your individual (not group-based) identity—spiritually speaking, if it feels good, do it. Sociologist Christian Smith calls the faith orientation of today's emerging adults “moralistic therapeutic deism.” This approach to religious commitment is not something that today's emerging adults invented. They learned it from their parents or from religious institutions that were shaped by their parents' Baby Boom generation. Baby Boomers largely rejected an understanding of religious involvement as a moral obligation or part of one's obligation to one's community. Boomers are religious “seekers” who have adopted a range of spiritual practices and transformed religious institutions to fit with their lives.

The Importance of Family Formation

Religion and family are intertwined and interdependent institutions. Since the 1970s, there have been two demographic trends that have reconfigured family formation in the United States. First, an increasing percentage of Americans never marry or, if married, never have children. Second, those who do marry and have children are delaying both of those events, sometimes well into their 30s. For the first time in history, the majority of emerging adults (those 18 to 29 years old) are not themselves married with children and are not surrounded by others who have made that life transition.

My own research suggests that mainstream religious institutions in the United States are still using an approach to family ministry that was developed in the 1950s. This form of ministry provides programming for children and teens and for mothers (and sometimes, now, for fathers). Programs for singles are relatively rare and most are oriented toward singlehood as a short-term status and focused on helping the single person to find a suitable Christian spouse. As Robert Wuthnow points out, this means that emerging adults today face a 10- to 15-year period in which religious institutions, by and large, do not offer meaningful ministries oriented to facilitating their longer and messier transition into adult establishment. And there are few ministries relevant to those who may plan on a longer-term period of singleness or childlessness and view this as a normal part of adult life. Among younger Americans (those under 45), unmarried adults are less likely to attend church than are their married counterparts today—but they are also less likely to attend church than their counterparts (single young adults) did a generation ago. And there are many more unmarried adults today than a generation ago. Changing family formation patterns explain most of the increase in the percentage of young adults who are not religiously involved.

New Realities—Distance from Organized Religion

Today's emerging adults are less involved in organized religion than are older adults:

- They are half as likely to attend church weekly or more (15% of 20-year-olds and 20% of 30-year-olds attend church weekly or more, compared to about 40% of older adults).
- Over 20% of emerging adults say they belong to no religious tradition, compared to 14% of all adults.
- 35% of emerging adults are not members of a church, synagogue, or mosque, compared to 19% of all adults.
- 23% of emerging adults (ages 18–29) say they are “secular” or “somewhat secular,” compared to 15% of those ages 35–64, and only 10% of those over 64. Emerging adults today are also less involved than their parents were:
- In the early 1970s, 31% of those under age 45 attended church weekly or more; only 25% do today. 14% said they “never” attend church; 20% say that today.
- Comparisons using other measures—daily prayer, the saliency of religion—show similar patterns.

Overall, evangelical Protestants do a better job than mainline Protestants of retaining their young adults, but these churches are no longer growing and are, instead, holding their own in membership (as are Jewish and Catholic traditions).

It was once common for sociologists to argue that even if young adults “dropped out” of religion in their late teens or early 20s, they would “come back” once they were married and started having children. But it is not clear that “coming back” is the right way to think about the religious trajectories of emerging adults. Larger numbers of them were not religious in the first place or were raised by Boomer parents who taught them to think of religious involvement not as an obligation but as a choice. Research by Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, sociologists at Berkeley, suggests that this changing parental orientation partly explains why the percentage of Americans claiming no religious identity rose from 7% in 1980

to 15% in 2000. They estimate that changing parental norms regarding children's religious involvement explain about half (roughly 4%) of this 8% increase. And for all emerging adults, it is unclear whether coming back to participation in organized religion is the automatic choice once one has lived for up to a decade without religious involvement.

The meaning of being religiously unaffiliated changes when the number of the unaffiliated increases. Once a gesture of rebellion for young adults, today's young adults do not interpret having a secular outlook or being unaffiliated as shocking or as a "statement." It is one of the taken-for-granted options. Overall, 20% of Americans identify as "spiritual, but not religious," and about 40% identify as both spiritual and religious. Younger adults (those born after 1965) are more likely to self-identify as "spiritual, not religious," and among emerging adults (those under 30), a language of spirituality is sometimes used as a way to signal a kind of "critical distance" from organized religion.

In a survey of 18- to 23-year-old Americans, sociologist Christian Smith identifies six religious types. Committed Traditionalists embrace a strong religious identity, know religious doctrine, and practice regularly (15%). Selective Adherents (30%) adopt some of the religious beliefs and practices of a particular religious tradition but reject others. The Spiritually Open (15%) are not religiously committed, but are open to the idea of religious faith and practice. The Religiously Indifferent and Religiously Disconnected either do not know much about religion or do not care about it either way (30% combined). And the Irreligious (10%) are secular in orientation and often critical of religion. Adding together the last three categories, a majority of emerging adults (55%) are neither committed to nor knowledgeable about mainstream religious institutions.

When they do choose to become involved in organized religion, emerging adults are understood, by some scholars, as the driving force behind the development of new forms of worship and religious organization. Some point to new kinds of congregations, for example, "emergent church" congregations that are consciously postmodern, eclectic, and organized in a nonhierarchical way. Others point to the fact that emerging adults are more comfortable with multiculturalism and value diversity; studies of congregations that resemble a racial/ethnic mosaic find that they are, largely,

young congregations. Still others wonder whether the megachurch phenomenon is driven in part by emerging adults wanting to "plug in" to large and multipurpose communities with modern music and aesthetics. But it is too soon to know whether any of these trends constitute a movement toward a new kind of emerging adult spirituality or religious practice.

Why Faith and Spirituality Matter

Scholars who study the faith and spirituality of emerging adults sometimes view the reduced religiosity of this generation as a cause for concern. In his book *Souls in Transition*, sociologist Christian Smith speaks to a "contemporary cultural crisis of knowledge and value" (Smith, 292) that has shaped the lives of emerging adults that it has left the majority of them thinking of the truth as relative at best or, at worst, unknowable. While he points to a laudable trend of increasing tolerance for diversity, he worries that their culture has failed them, leaving them "lacking in conviction or direction" and in "larger visions of what is true and real and good, in both the private and the public realms" (Smith, 294).

Others, however, reach different conclusions. Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist, has studied the spiritual and religious lives of young adults, and he also finds that some emerging adults are deists who are not all that concerned with doctrine and that some are not religious at all. Moreover, all the young adults he studied adopt an individualistic approach to faith and spirituality. But Arnett sees this as a normal developmental feature of young adult life, in which a period of exploration and self-focus is a necessary step on the way to adult autonomy. He cautions researchers to be careful about transferring the stereotypes that were once common regarding adolescents—that they are lazy, selfish, and angst-ridden—to emerging adults. He points to the overall high levels of optimism, well-being, and life-satisfaction among emerging adults as evidence that their tolerance and openness do not undermine a sense of identity or worth. He uses their high rates of volunteering as one example of how emerging adults exhibit a moral seriousness and a compassion for others that belie common stereotypes. From Arnett's perspective, there is no generalized "crisis of values" among emerging

adults. Rather, there is a long period of healthy exploration and the forging of new, generationally appropriate norms regarding relationships, consumption, and the like.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow also rejects the “crisis of values” view. Among emerging adults, those who would in previous generations have been nominally religious have chosen to not affiliate or identify. But among those who identify, religious faith matters in shaping “private” behaviors like marriage or the decision to have a child and “public” behaviors like voting or forming views of social and political issues. Like Arnett, Wuthnow emphasizes the appropriateness of a long period of adult establishment, both religious and otherwise, given the economic realities that young adults face. He places the crisis within institutions, which have been slow to acknowledge and adapt to the changing realities young adults face.

There is debate about whether emerging adults are experiencing a crisis of values or are exploring and forming a generationally appropriate set of values that make sense given the economic and institutional arrangements that shape their lives. But there is no debate among social scientists about the generally positive effects that religious involvement has on a range of life-outcomes: reduced crime, delinquency, and depression; increased well-being; increased happiness and satisfaction in one’s life and with one’s marriage and family relationships; marital stability; civic involvement; and general health. Christian Smith argues that young adults today, compared to earlier generations, show increased consumerism and materialism and a higher tolerance of alcohol use, drug use, and casual sexual encounters. He believes those trends are caused by reduced religious involvement.

Robert Wuthnow’s work raises questions about whether the positive outcomes associated with religious involvement depend upon finding a religious community with appropriate ministries that fit the realities of young adults’ lives. He suggests this is more difficult for today’s emerging adults than for previous generations. And Jeffrey Arnett’s work raises the question of whether religious involvement has protective effects only for those for whom it is legitimate and taken-for-granted. Finally, it should be noted that we know far less about the effects of spirituality on well-being than we do about the effects of standard measures of institutional religious involvement. We also do not know whether emerging adults, given their longer

period of adult establishment, rely more heavily than their parents did on extended family relationships, peer relationships, and other sources of support (including paid services) that might affect their well-being. How religious involvement matters in the overall “package” of social support one receives is a question that has not received much scholarly attention.

From the point of view of religious leaders, the faith and spirituality of emerging adults matters for a much more practical reason. It is one thing if emerging adults are less involved in mainstream religious institutions because they are “stretching out” the period of adult establishment and plan to affiliate when they are older and have formed their own nuclear family households. It is quite another if the lower religious participation rates of today’s emerging adults signal a long-term trajectory of reduced religious participation. Such a trend would effectively “shrink” mainstream religious institutions. This could be understood as religious decline if the reference point is the 1950s. More accurately, this should be understood as a return to more normal levels of religious involvement, because the religious expansion of the 1950s and its high rates of church attendance and affiliation were the exception, not the rule, in the history of American religion.

While it is important for religious leaders to attend to the cultural changes ushered in by today’s emerging adults, it is also important for religious leaders to recognize the continuities in faith and spirituality between today’s emerging adults and earlier generations. Emerging adults are restless and voluntaristic and critical of traditional authority figures and institutions. When it comes to matters of faith, they are pragmatic therapeutic moralists, and in this, they are quintessentially American.

Resources

Young Adults’ Religion and Values

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Changing SEA: The Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults Project

www.changingsea.org

Who are emerging adults? and **What churches do they like?** This project has assembled a team of expert researchers, assigned them specific tasks, and present their answers online at: www.changingsea.org. The Changing SEA project, funded by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., was the final project of the late Dean Hoge, Professor of Sociology at Catholic University of America. It was his desire to conduct research on young adults both in and out of churches, and then communicate that research to ministry practitioners.

- **Who Are Emerging Adults?** *An essay forum with 15 essays on a range of topics related to the lives of emerging adults, written by highly regarded scholars, which synthesize an array of academic articles, summarizing key points and making them accessible and useful for your ministry.*
- **What Churches Do Emerging Adults Like?** *An ethnographic investigation that explores: What kinds of churches do emerging adults attend? Why do they go? How involved are they? How do churches engage emerging adults in meaningful ways? In October 2010 we’ll begin posting the best practices of churches which are effectively attracting and engaging emerging adults to find out what makes them work.*

Religion & the Millennial Generation

Insights from the Latest Research

Religion Among the Millennials

Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next

Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Report

The Pew Research Center has initiated a multi-year research project on the Millennial Generation (born between 1981-2000). In February 2010 the Center issued a report on 18- to 29-year olds, *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next*, that provides an extensive research-based view of the Millennial Generation of emerging adults. The complete report can be found at: <http://pewresearch.org/millennials>. Part of that report was "Religion among the Millennials"—a profile of religious trends in the Millennial Generation. This article highlights several of the major findings from this report. The complete report can be found at: <http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx>.

By some key measures, Americans ages 18 to 29 are considerably less religious than older Americans. Fewer young adults belong to any particular faith than older people do today. They also are less likely to be affiliated than their parents' and grandparents' generations were when they were young. Fully one-in-four members of the Millennial generation—so called because they were born after 1980 and began to come of age around the year 2000—are unaffiliated with any particular faith. Indeed, Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20% in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13% in the late 1970s). Young adults also attend religious services less often than older Americans today. And compared with their elders today, fewer young people say that religion is very important in their lives.

Yet in other ways, Millennials remain fairly traditional in their religious beliefs and practices. Pew Research Center surveys show, for instance, that young adults' beliefs about life after death and the existence of heaven, hell and miracles closely resemble the beliefs of older people today. Though young adults pray less often than their elders do today, the number of young adults who say they

pray every day rivals the portion of young people who said the same in prior decades. And though belief in God is lower among young adults than among older adults, Millennials say they believe in God with absolute certainty at rates similar to those seen among Gen Xers a decade ago. This suggests that some of the religious differences between younger and older Americans today are not entirely generational but result in part from people's tendency to place greater emphasis on religion as they age.

In their social and political views, young adults are clearly more accepting than older Americans of homosexuality, more inclined to see evolution as the best explanation of human life and less prone to see Hollywood as threatening their moral values. At the same time, Millennials are no less convinced than their elders that there are absolute standards of right and wrong. And they are slightly more supportive than their elders of government efforts to protect morality, as well as somewhat more comfortable with involvement in politics by churches and other houses of worship.

Religious Affiliation

18-29 Year Olds

- Christian: 68%
 - Protestant: 43%
 - Catholic: 22%
- Other Religions: 6%
- Unaffiliated: 25%

The large proportion of young adults who are unaffiliated with a religion is a result, in part, of the decision by many young people to leave the religion of their upbringing without becoming involved with a new faith. In total, nearly one-in-five adults under age 30 (18%) say they were raised in a religion but are now unaffiliated with any particular faith.

Data from the General Social Surveys (GSS), which have been conducted regularly since 1972, confirm that young adults are not just more unaffiliated than their elders today but are also more unaffiliated than young people have been in recent decades. In GSS surveys conducted since 2000, nearly one-quarter of people ages 18-29 have described their religion as “none.” By comparison, only about half as many young adults were unaffiliated in the 1970s and 1980s.

Among Millennials who are affiliated with a religion, however, the intensity of their religious affiliation is as strong today as among previous generations when they were young. More than one-third of religiously affiliated Millennials (37%) say they are a “strong” member of their faith, the same as the 37% of Gen Xers who said this at a similar age and not significantly different than among Baby Boomers when they were young (31%).

Worship Attendance

Attending Services at Least Weekly

- All 18-29 Year Olds: 33%
- Religious Affiliated Ages 18-29: 43%
- Evangelical Protestant Churches: 55%
- Mainline Protestant Churches: 33%
- Historical Black Churches: 55%
- Catholic Church: 34%

In the Pew Forum’s 2007 Religious Landscape Survey, young adults report attending religious services less often than their elders today. One-third of those under age 30 say they attend worship services at least once a week, compared with 41% of

adults 30 and older (including more than half of people 65 and older). But generational differences in worship attendance tend to be smaller within religious groups (with the exception of Catholics) than in the total population. In other words, while young people are less likely than their elders to be affiliated with a religion, among those who are affiliated, generational differences in worship attendance are fairly small.

The long-running GSS also finds that young people attend religious services less often than their elders. Furthermore, Millennials currently attend church or worship services at lower rates than Baby Boomers did when they were younger; 18% of Millennials currently report attending religious services weekly or nearly weekly, compared with 26% of Boomers in the late 1970s. But Millennials closely resemble members of Generation X when they were in their 20s and early 30s, when one-in-five Gen Xers (21%) reported attending religious services weekly or nearly weekly.

Other Religious Practices

- **Read Scripture Weekly Ages 18-20:** 27%
 - Evangelical Protestant Churches: 51%
 - Mainline Protestant Churches: 23%
 - Historical Black Churches: 45%
 - Catholic Church: 17%
- **Pray Daily Ages 18-20:** 48%
 - Evangelical Protestant Churches: 73%
 - Mainline Protestant Churches: 49%
 - Historical Black Churches: 70%
 - Catholic Church: 47%
- **Meditate Weekly Ages 18-20:** 26%
 - Evangelical Protestant Churches: 28%
 - Mainline Protestant Churches: 18%
 - Historical Black Churches: 37%
 - Catholic Church: 24%

Consistent with their lower levels of affiliation, young adults engage in a number of religious practices less often than do older Americans, especially the oldest group in the population (those 65 and older). Although Millennials report praying less often than their elders do today, the GSS shows that Millennials are in sync with Generation X and Baby Boomers when members of those generations were younger. In the 2008 GSS survey, roughly four-in-ten Millennials report praying daily (41%), as did

42% of members of Generation X in the late 1990s. Baby Boomers reported praying at a similar rate in the early 1980s (47%), when the first data are available for them. GSS data show that daily prayer increases as people get older.

Religious Attitudes and Beliefs

Importance of Religion

■ All 18-29 Year Olds:	45%
■ Religious Affiliated Ages 18-29:	57%
■ Evangelical Protestant Churches:	71%
■ Mainline Protestant Churches:	42%
■ Historical Black Churches:	81%
■ Catholic Church:	45%

Young people exhibit lower levels of religious intensity than their elders do today, and this holds true within a variety of religious groups. Gallup surveys conducted over the past 30 years that use a similar measure of religion's importance confirm that religion is somewhat less important for Millennials today than it was for members of Generation X when they were of a similar age. In Gallup surveys in the late 2000s, 40% of Millennials said religion is very important, as did 48% of Gen Xers in the late 1990s. However, young people today look very much like Baby Boomers did at a similar point in their life cycle; in a 1978 Gallup poll, 39% of Boomers said religion was very important to them.

Belief in God

■ All 18-29 Year Olds:	64%
■ Religious Affiliated Ages 18-29:	79%
■ Evangelical Protestant Churches:	86%
■ Mainline Protestant Churches:	70%
■ Historical Black Churches:	88%
■ Catholic Church:	64%

Young adults are less convinced of God's existence than their elders are today; 64% of young adults say they are absolutely certain of God's existence, compared with 73% of those ages 30 and older. In this case, differences are most pronounced among Catholics, with younger Catholics being 10 points less likely than older Catholics to believe in God with absolute certainty. In other religious traditions, age differences are smaller.

Obtaining Eternal Life, Interpreting Religious Teachings

	Own religion is one true faith that leads to eternal life	Many religions can lead to eternal life	Only one way to interpret own religion	More than one true way
All 18-29 Year Olds	29%	66%	23%	74%
Evangelical Protestant Churches	43%	52%	33%	66%
Mainline Protestant Churches	18%	79%	11%	87%
Historical Black Protestant Churches	39%	55%	35%	63%
Catholic Church	17%	78%	15%	82%

Young people who are affiliated with a religion are more inclined than their elders to believe their own religion is the one true path to eternal life (though in all age groups, more people say many religions can lead to eternal life than say theirs is the one true faith). Nearly three-in-ten religiously affiliated adults under age 30 (29%) say their own religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life, higher than the 23% of religiously affiliated people ages 30 and older who say the same. This pattern is evident among all three Protestant groups but not among Catholics.

Interestingly, while more young Americans than older Americans view their faith as the single path to salvation, young adults are also more open to multiple ways of interpreting their religion. Nearly three-quarters of affiliated young adults (74%) say there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their faith, compared with 67% of affiliated adults ages 30 and older.

American Millennials: Generations Apart *Religion*

Marist College Institute for Public Opinion and The Knights of Columbus
Marist Poll February 2010

The Knights of Columbus, in partnership with The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, conducted a survey of American Millennials, ages 18 to 29. The complete report, available online, presents the findings of the questions on religion from a survey which interviewed a cross-section of Americans, including an oversample of Millennials (18-29) from December 23, 2009 – January 4, 2010. This article highlights several of the major findings from this report. The complete report can be found at the Knights of Columbus website: www.kofc.org/un/cmfr/resources/Communications/documents/poll_mil_religion.pdf.

Generational Profile

	All Millennials	Catholic Millennials
Religious observance (attends religious services at least once a month)	33%	25%
Faith (believes in God)	76%	85%
Mission Involvement (have participated in religious retreats, mission teams, religious service projects)	30%	29%
Volunteerism (volunteered their time in the past 12 months)	67%	71%
Donated money (donated money to a charity in the past 12 months)	56%	52%

Top 5 Life Goals

Which of the following do you think best captures your top two long-term life goals?

	All Millennials	Catholic Millennials
To be spiritual or close to God	31%	18%
To get married and have a family	27%	33%
To get rich	11%	10%
To be an expert in your field	10%	11%
To have fun	8%	4%

Morals: Fixed or Relative?

Which of the following statements comes closer to your view?

	All Millennials	Catholic Millennials
Morals are relative; that is, there is no definite right and wrong for everybody	64%	82%
Morals are fixed and based on unchanging standards	37%	18%

Virtues Which are Not Valued Enough in American Society

In this country, do think that each of the following is generally valued or not valued enough?

	All Millennials	Catholic Millennials
Commitment to marriage	77%	82%
Personal responsibility	75%	69%
Respect for other people	74%	68%
Respect for a person's hard work	71%	75%
Honesty and integrity	71%	75%
Concern for the less fortunate	64%	63%
Tolerance of people who are different	62%	58%
Respect for the law	61%	57%
Respect for authority	61%	58%
A work ethic	61%	58%
Belief in God	51%	51%
Religious observance	50%	43%

Moral Choices

Regardless of whether or not you think it should be legal, do you believe that, in general, each one of the following issues is morally acceptable or morally wrong?

Millennials & Catholic Millennials	Morally Acceptable	Morally Wrong	Not a Moral Issue
Claiming someone else's work as your own	3%	91%	7%
Catholics	2%	91%	7%
Marital infidelity, having an affair outside of marriage	4%	89%	8%
Catholics	4%	87%	9%
Business decisions motivated by greed	9%	77%	15%
Catholics	5%	76%	19%
Increasing profits be decreasing the quality of a product or service	7%	68%	26%
Catholics	5%	65%	30%
Abortion	20%	58%	23%
Catholics	21%	66%	13%
Medical testing on animals	18%	55%	28%
Catholics	15%	65%	20%
Economic development at the expense of the environment	7%	55%	38%
Catholics	5%	62%	33%
Drug use	7%	55%	38%
Catholics	6%	47%	46%
Euthanasia, that is, assisted suicide	23%	52%	25%
Catholics	20%	63%	17%
Same sex marriage	28%	47%	25%
Catholics	35%	37%	28%
Gay and lesbian relations	27%	44%	30%
Catholics	35%	35%	28%
Having a baby outside of marriage	31%	40%	29%
Catholics	33%	35%	41%
Divorce	29%	35%	36%
Catholics	24%	35%	41%

Medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos	37%	33%	30%
Catholics	37%	33%	30%
Sex between an unmarried man and a woman	35%	33%	32%
Catholics	38%	20%	42%

Religion in Daily Life

How important or unimportant would you say religion is in your own life?

	Millennials	Catholic Millennials
Extremely Important	25%	21%
Very Important	19%	28%
Somewhat Important	26%	31%
Not Very Important	14%	7%
Not at All Important	17%	13%

Belief in God

Do you believe in God, or not, or are you unsure?

	Millennials	Catholic Millennials
Yes	76%	85%
No	8%	3%
Unsure	16%	13%

Some people say they are spiritual but not religious. How true or not would you say that is of you?

	Millennials	Catholic Millennials
Very True	25%	14%
Somewhat True	41%	50%
Not True at All	33%	36%

Desire to Learn

How interested are you in learning more about your religion?

	Millennials	Catholic Millennials
Very Interested	30%	28%
Somewhat Interested	31%	37%
Not Very Interested	21%	24%
Not at All Interested	18%	12%



Religious Trajectories from the Teenage Years into the Emerging Adult Years

Christian Smith with Patricia Snell and Kyle Longest

What factors in adolescence influence religious commitments and practices during emerging adulthood? What differences in the lives of teenagers are associated with stronger and weaker religious faith and practice among 18- to 23-year olds? Because the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) collected data on the same sample of youth over time, we are able to answer those questions.

One of our central aims in this article is to identify factors related to the teenage years that correlate statistically with religious differences during the emerging adult years and that we have good theoretical reasons to believe act as causal influences of those differences. Another central goal is to theorize the causal social mechanisms that explain the association between the identified teenage factors and the emerging adult religion outcomes. We also examine combinations of factors that represent different paths to the same highly religious emerging adult outcome, as well as the main divergent paths that persons take through their religious and spiritual lives from the teenage to the emerging adult years. One of the main stories from the analysis of the research is that the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years reflects a great deal of religious continuity and stability, but also a significant amount of religious change, most of which works in the direction of religious decline. Many emerging adults continue religiously much as they were as teenagers. Many others become either some or a lot less religious. And a small group becomes more religious.

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Identifying Influential Factors

The initial task was to determine a good measure of higher and lower religious commitment and practice during emerging adulthood. After exploring a variety of alternative approaches, one excellent measure was chosen that combined information about respondents' frequency of religious service attendance, professed importance of faith in everyday life, and frequency of personal prayer.

The four different levels of religiousness that our categorization produces for both teenage and emerging adult respondents are shown in the table below. The first row shows that the Lowest, Moderate, and Highest categories share similar number of emerging adults, at roughly 22 percent, while the Minimal religious category contains the largest percentage of emerging adults at 32 percent. The second row shows the same distribution for the respondents when they were surveyed as teenagers. When compared to emerging adults, we see that the number of respondents in the Highest religious group declined from 34 to 22 percent—a loss of 22 percentage points. The Moderate group lost 7 percentage points. Meanwhile the Minimal religious group grew 7 percent over the five years, and the Lowest religious group doubled in size, gaining 11 percentage points.

	Level of Religiousness			
	Lowest	Minimal	Moderate	Highest
Emerging Adults today	22%	32%	23%	22%
When they were teenagers	11%	25%	30%	34%
% of teenagers staying in the same group	73%	44%	29%	46%
% of teenagers moving to a <u>more</u> religious group	27%	22%	17%	N/A
% of teenagers moving to a <u>less</u> religious group	N/A	34%	55%	54%

The chart shows that the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years involves in general an impressive amount of stability (see Row #3)—46% of the Highest group as teens stayed in that group as emerging adults, but also, when it comes to change, a significant decline in religious

commitments and practice (see Row #5) – 55% of the Moderate group and 54% of the Highest group as teenagers moved to a less religious group as emerging adults. The teenage group that underwent the greatest amount of extreme change was the Highest religion category—one in four high religion teenagers moved to either the Minimal or Lowest religion categories by emerging adulthood. Moderately religious teenagers are the most likely to shift to a different level, with well more than half becoming less religious and one in five becoming more religious.

The second task was to identify factors from the teenage years (ages 13 to 17) that correlate with differences in religion during the emerging adult years.

Among the variables in the first NSYR survey of teenagers, having had highly religious parents, a high importance of faith, frequent personal prayer, a larger number of personal religious experiences, frequent scripture reading, and frequent religious service attendance during the teenage years are the *most strongly* associated with more religious service attendance, greater importance of faith, and more frequent prayer during emerging adulthood.

By contrast, having doubts about religious beliefs, other teenagers looking down on one for one's religion, attending a religious high school, having engaged in oral sex, feeling close to parents, and doing more mission trips are the *most weakly* correlated factors with the three outcomes in emerging adulthood (religious service attendance, importance of faith, and frequent prayer).

When statistical techniques are used to isolate the independent effects of each variable under consideration, five factors measured during the teenage years are *consistently very important* in associating with emerging adult religion:

Consistently Very Important

1. frequent personal prayer during the teenage years
2. strong parental religion—more religiously committed parents (greater religious attendance and professed importance of faith) during the teenage years
3. high importance of religious faith in daily life during the teenage years
4. few religious doubts—expressed few or no doubts about religious beliefs during the teenage years

5. religious experiences—making a commitment as a teenager to God and/or experiencing a miracle, prayers answered, and/or a “powerful religious experience”

Other factors beyond these five also matter, in that they also exert independent influences, but not strongly and consistently as these five factors. The additional independent factors were categorized in the following manner:

Consistently Somewhat Important

- believed in divine miracles
- frequent scripture reading
- many supportive religious adults
- sexual chastity
- made fun of for religious faith

Conditionally Somewhat Important

- believed sex belongs in marriage
- religious service attendance
- more religious friends
- satisfaction with congregation
- Sunday school attendance
- liked youth group
- teen closeness to parents
- number of religious activities

Not Independently Important

- mission trips
- religious high school
- wanted similar church at age 25

In order to sustain high levels of religious commitment and practice during the emerging adult years, several distinct factors seem especially important: first, strong *relational modeling and support* for religious commitment; second, genuine *internalization* of religious significance (importance of faith, religious experiences, no doubts); and third, the *personal practice* of religious faith (prayer). It appears that also important are certain theological *belief commitments* (in miracles), more intensity of *personal practice* of religious faith (scripture reading), another form of *relational modeling and support* (more supportive adults in the congregation), and *paying certain costs* for one’s religious beliefs (abstaining from sex, being made fun of for faith).

What Difference Do These Factors Make?

A teenager who among his or her peers scored in the top one-quarter of a scale measuring these four factors—(1) *parental religion*, (2) *prayer*, (3) *importance of faith*, and (4) *scripture reading*—stands an 85% chance of landing in the Highest category of religion as an emerging adult; but one who scores in the Lowest one-quarter on that scale stands only a miniscule chance (0.4 percent) of landing at the high end of religion when he or she is 18-23 years old. In short, the combination of a teenager’s parent religion, importance of faith, prayer, and scripture reading makes an enormous substantive difference in religious outcomes during emerging adulthood.

A teenager who scores in the top quarter of a scale measuring three more factors—(5) *having supportive nonparent adults in one’s religious congregation*, (6) *having religious experiences*, and (7) *not doubting religious faith*—stands 75 times the chance of landing in the Highest category of religion compared to one who scores in the bottom quarter. These three variables taken alone thus also make a big difference in the probability that a teenager will end up being highly religious as he or she grows into emerging adulthood.

In brief, with these seven factors alone, we have identified some powerful teenage factors associated with and, we think, causing differences in emerging adult religious commitment and practice.

Religious Continuities and Differences

Another way to examine religious continuities and differences between the teenage and emerging adult years is to calculate predicted probabilities of teenagers being at one of the four levels of religion, from Lowest to Highest commitment and practice, to ending up as emerging adults in one of four religious groups, also ranked from Highest to Lowest religious commitment and practice. As a baseline, teenagers are divided into four religious groups—the **devoted**, **regular**, the **sporadic**, and the **disengaged**. What are the percentage likelihoods that members of each of these religious groups will end up in one of the four levels of religious during

the emerging adult years—*Lowest, Minimal, Moderate, and Highest?* The **religiously devoted** teenagers have a more than 50 percent chance of ending up in the Highest religious group and only a 2 percent chance of ending up in the Lowest religious group as emerging adults. They have a 32 percent chance of ending up in the Moderate religious group and a 15 percent chance of being in the Minimal religion groups as emerging adults. In short, one can predict the probabilities of a highly religious teenager ending up in different groups by religious commitment as emerging adults. When one does, one finds that they are very likely to end up in one of the two most highly religious groups five years later. Highly religious teenagers are not very likely to become very unreligious five years later.

Looking at the same analysis for teenagers who, by contrast, were **religiously disengaged** as teenagers, they have a 54 percent likelihood of ending up in the Lowest religion level as emerging adults; and a 38 percent chance of being in the Minimal religious group. They have only 6 and 2 percent chances, respectively, of becoming Moderately and Highly Religious as emerging adults. The group of the *least religious* teenagers (age 13-17) is also extremely likely to remain in the Least religious group of emerging adults (age 18-23). Again, strong tendencies toward continuity in religious commitment and practice are apparent. The two middle groups—the **regulars** and **sporadics**—show a similar pattern. The **regulars** are most likely to end up in the Moderate religious group as emerging adults, and second most likely to end up in the Minimal religious group. The **sporadic** teenagers are most likely to end up among the Minimal group as emerging adults, and second most likely to be among the Lowest group five years later. For both groups, any change that does happen moves in the direction of less religion.

In short, teenage religion strongly predicts emerging adult religion. At least across this five-year time span, the forces of religious continuity are stronger than the forces of change. Most youth tend as emerging adults to remain generally the kind of religious people they were as teenagers. In the midst of this continuity, we do observe a stronger “downwardly”-shifting tendency among many youth when it comes to religion. But what we clearly do not observe are random outcomes in which the religious orientations of teenagers are “thrown into

the air” during the transition to emerging adulthood and then land in quite unpredictable places.

Pathways to Becoming Highly Religious Emerging Adults

What combination of factors actually can and do lead to particular religious outcomes in the lives of emerging adults. Are their particular *configurations* of multiple variables that produce high religious commitment and practice among emerging adults? Are different emerging adult religious experiences and conditions the result of identifiable combinations of other factors operating earlier in their lives?

The following diagrams show the basic results of statistical analysis of conjunctions of teenage-era factors that most likely lead to the Highest level of emerging adult religion five years later. The outcome measure here is, again, based on high levels of religious service attendance, high professed importance of faith, and frequent personal prayer. The Highest level of religion represents 21 percent of the emerging adult population. Analysis reveals six different patterns of combinations of four factors that reflect six different paths that teenagers who are most likely to become highly religious emerging adults might take. These six configurations are simply the combinations of factors that do so at a rate higher than 50 percent—that is, more often than not.

Path 1

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



High teen importance of religious faith



Teen has many personal religious experiences



Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

The **first path** reveals that one of the six most likely ways that teenagers grow up to be highly religious emerging adults is by experiencing the combination of these four factors: teenagers who had highly religious parents, for whom religious faith was exceptionally important in their lives, who had had many religious experiences, *and* who prayed

and read scripture frequently. **Fully 68 percent of youth whose lives embodied the combination of those four factors ended up as highly religious emerging adults five years later.**

Path 2

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



High teen importance of religious faith



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

The **second path** shows a very similar configuration of factors leading to high emerging adult religion, except that in this combination, teenagers having many religious experiences is replaced with their having no doubts about their religious beliefs.

Path 3

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



High teen importance of religious faith



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen has many personal religious experiences

The **third path** looks very much like the second path, except that frequent prayer and scripture reading is replaced with having no doubts about one's religious beliefs.

The first three paths, then, all require teenagers to have had highly religious parents and to have said that their religious faith was exception important in their lives. Then, combinations of two other among three possible factors—having many religious experiences, praying and reading scripture frequently, and having no doubts about religious beliefs—are also necessary to more than likely land the teenagers in the high emerging adult religion category.

Path 4

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen has many personal religious experiences

A **fourth path** begins to add complexity. In Path 4, for teenagers to join the religious Highest 21 percent of emerging adults requires them to have had highly religious parents, many nonparental adults in their religious congregations to whom they could turn for help and support, no doubts about their religious beliefs, *and* many personal religious experiences. Compared to the common conditions in the previous three paths, supportive nonparental adults in religious congregations can “substitute” in Path 4 for very high importance of religious faith. Still, a combination of a minimum of four total factors remains necessary for teens to avoid most likely ending up outside of the most highly religious group of emerging adults.

Youth in Paths 2, 3, and 4 joined the most highly religious group of emerging adults after five years at rates of 70, 68, and 67 percent, respectively.

Path 5

Low parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

A **fifth path** introduces a further wrinkle in the analysis. Here we have teenagers more likely than not becoming among the most highly religious emerging adults *without* having parents who were highly religious, unlike those in all four of the previous paths. What is necessary for that to happen under that condition, however, is for these teenagers to have the presence of many nonparental adults in their religious congregations to whom they could turn for help and support *and* to possess no doubts

about their religious beliefs *and* to be engaging in frequent prayer and scripture reading. In other words, teenagers whose parents are not highly religious may nevertheless be able to become highly religious emerging adults, but in order to overcome that parental “deficit,” they must have supportive religious nonparental adults in their lives, harbor no doubts about their faith, and pray and read scripture a lot.

Path 6

- High teen importance of religious faith
- +
- Teen has many personal religious experiences
- +
- Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs
- +
- Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

The **sixth path** reveals a configuration of factors more likely than not to lead to high-end emerging adult religion that does not include either parental or nonparental social ties to religion. In this case, teenagers may become among the most highly religious emerging adults “on their own.” But they need to “superreligious”—believing that faith is exceptionally important in the lives, having many personal religious experiences, having no doubts about their faith, *and* frequently praying and reading scripture. (Furthermore, an ancillary analysis revealed that such teenagers had parents who were in fact quite highly religious, at a level just below the threshold required to count as the most highly religious parents in the statistical analysis—meaning that they did not actually have entirely no or few relational ties to religious faith.)

Sixty-four percent of Path 5 and 77 percent of Path 6 youth ended up in the most highly religious emerging adult group after five years.

These findings reveal some important insights:

1. No single factor can produce high levels of emerging adult religiousness. Instead, multiple combinations of factors working together are necessary to more likely than not produce that outcome. When teenagers’ lives reflect only one strong factor, their chances to becoming highly religious emerging adults are lower than average.
2. Every most-likely path to highly religious emerging adulthood must combine

combinations of *distinctly different kinds* of causal factors, almost always including groupings of relational, personal-subjective, and devotional-practice factors. In almost all cases, necessary among these variables are strong, personal relationships with adults who bond teenagers to faith communities (either parents or supportive nonparents), strong expression of subjective teen personal faith commitment and experience (high importance of faith, few doubts, many religious experiences), *and* high frequencies of religious practice (prayer, scripture reading). In five of the six configurations, teenagers’ having no religious doubts is a necessary condition for strong emerging adult religious religion. In four of the six configurations, four different factors—high parent religiousness, high importance of faith, having many religious experiences, and frequently prayer and reading scripture—are all necessary conditions. In these mixtures of influences, adult relational ties to faith, both parental and nonparental, are clearly very important. The only combination of factors in which high parental religiousness or supportive nonparental adult ties are not necessary (Path 6) involves a fourfold combination of other religious factors indicating a kind of “superspiritual” religious teenager. ***In sum, the paths from teenage years that more often than not lead to highly religious emerging adulthood almost inevitably involve strong relational ties to religion and a faith that is personally embraced very strongly and typically, regular personal devotional religious practices.*** Not single influences but rather combinations of different kinds of factors are what shape lives toward achieving this outcome.

3. Certain factors can “substitute” for other similar ones. For example, we have shown that the religious lives of parents are normally very important in shaping the religious outcomes of their growing children. But our analysis has also shown that in some circumstances, supportive nonparental adults with whom teenagers have real relationships in religious organizational contexts can provide the necessary social bonding to and support in religious faith and

practice to “replace” the normally crucial role of highly religious parents when that is absent (Path 5). For that situation to work, however, teenagers also need to hold no doubts about their faith *and* frequently practice personal religious devotions (prayer, scripture reading). If any of those are missing, and if the teenagers are not “superspiritual” youth (Path 6), then highly religious parents simply must be in the picture for teenagers to be more than 50 percent likely to end up highly religious as emerging adults. Likewise, teenagers with some doubts about their religious faith can become among the most highly religious emerging adults (Path 1). But to do so, in addition to having highly religious parents, they need to counter those doubts by having many personal religious experiences and frequently praying and reading scripture.

Altogether, the six pathways account for the specific combinations of factors by which 34 percent of all highly religious emerging adults become highly religious. And of all of the teenagers who traveled one or another of these six pathways, 68 percent ended up five years later belonging to the relatively small highly religious emerging adult group. That means, on the one hand, that we have here identified the complex combinations of factors that are most likely to produce the Highest level of religion among emerging adults. On the other hand, it also means that there are many other ways to become a highly religious emerging adult. Every other combination of factors examined in the study—and there are many—tends more likely to produce emerging adults who are not highly religious emerging adults. That is in part due to the fact that most emerging adults are not highly religious—by our measure in this analysis, 79 percent are not. Still, *some* youth whose lives reflect the many other possible combinations of these variables, improbably, due in fact end up highly religious emerging adults. It is not likely, but when added altogether, the small number of improbably pathways ends up accounting for the majority of highly religious adults. However, despite that fact, when we step back and examine the actual probabilities of U.S. teenagers ending up as highly religious during the ages 18-23, there are only six combinations of these the most important factors that are more likely than not to produce that

outcome: the six pathways. Every other combination of factors makes it more likely that a teen will not become a highly religious emerging adult, even if some teenagers in those other combinations improbably do.

Pathways from High Teenage Religiousness to Low

According to our analysis, for youth who as teenagers were among the most highly religious to slip down as emerging adults into the lowest two categories of religion takes a combination of factors that together reflect lower parental religiousness, lower personal importance of religion, and combinations of doubts about faith, less frequent personal devotion, and fewer religious experiences. In the chart below, we see three distinct possible paths that more often than not lead the more highly religious teenagers into not very religious emerging adult lives. In all three of the configurations of factors (paths), we see as necessary conditions having parents who are not among the most religious *and* expressing lower levels of the importance of one’s faith. In all three configurations, we also see combinations of two of either greater doubts about faith, less frequent personal prayer and scripture reading, and fewer personal religious experiences.

Path 1

Lower parental religious service attendance and importance of faith



Lower teen importance of religious faith



Teen **less** frequently prays and reads scripture



Teen has at least **some** doubts about religious beliefs



Teen has **fewer** adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support

In **Path 1**, it takes a combination of these factors plus having fewer supportive nonparental adults in one’s religious congregation to lead to lower levels of emerging adult religion.

Path 2

- Lower parental religious service attendance and importance of faith
- +
- Lower teen importance of religious faith
- +
- Teen has had **fewer** personal religious experiences
- +
- Teen has at least **some** doubts about religious beliefs
- +
- Teen frequently prays and reads scripture
- +
- Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support

Path 2 shows that the combination of somewhat lower parental religiosity and personal importance of faith, few personal relationships experiences, and some doubts about religious faith is enough to neutralize and overwhelm the fact that these highly religious teenagers also prayed and read scripture and had many supportive nonparental adults in their religious congregations.

Path 3

- Lower parental religious service attendance and importance of faith
- +
- Lower teen importance of religious faith
- +
- Teen has **fewer** personal religious experiences
- +
- Teen **less** frequently prays and reads scripture
- +
- Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs

Similarly **Path 3** reveals that the combination of somewhat lower parental religiosity and personal importance of faith, fewer personal religious experiences, and less frequent prayer and scripture reading are sufficient to counteract and overpower the fact that these highly religious teenagers also said they had no doubts about their religious faith.

Altogether, 60 percent of teens who experienced one of these three combinations of factors ended up as emerging adults in the lower religion categories. And 56 percent of all of those high religion teenagers who did end up as emerging adults in a low religion category got there by following one of these three paths. All of these six variables, in other words, appear in various combinations to be important influences on the outcome. Thus, even for youth who are as teenagers quite highly religious, the lack of the strongest

parent and nonparental ties to religious faith combined with holding a religious faith that is not extremely important to one's life and/or praying and reading scripture less frequently and/or having fewer personal religious experiences and/or harboring some doubts about religious faith puts those highly religious teenagers at "risk" of becoming low religion emerging adults five years later. When present, in other words, the same factors that combine to make "life recipes" for sustaining high religious faith and practice into the emerging adult years are also those that, when absent, combine to make recipes for declining religion over the same years.

Again, stated at a more abstract theoretical level, what clearly matters in the teenager's situation, for shaping the religious outcomes under consideration, is relational ties with religious adults—with both parents and others in one's religious congregation—importance of one's faith, and other combinations of one's religious practices, experiences, and assurance. These factors operating in opposite directions either reinforce or let disintegrate even relatively high religious commitments and practices held during the teenage years as youth move into emerging adulthood.

Theorizing about Causal Social Mechanisms

We have identified a number of measured variables that seem to correlate significantly with differences in observed levels of emerging adult religion. Therefore, the *causal* question, now is if these factors not only correlate with but actually cause those outcomes, then exactly why and how do they do so? What social mechanisms are at work to causally produce those different results?

We have theorized what we think are the actual causal dynamics involved in what appear to be the seven most important teenage-year factors associated with strong emerging adult religion. The following descriptions summarizes the main mechanisms behind the important variables leading to higher religiosity in emerging adulthood. In each case, it is not simply a score on a survey measure itself that produces the outcome. Rather, "below the surface" of the observations, complex sets of social causal mechanisms—usually not directly observable—are operating, according to the real

nature of the things in question, to generate the observed result.

1. Strong Parent Religion

We will begin with the influence of strong parental religion during the teenage years. Why and how does that function through specific social causal mechanisms to produce stronger emerging adult religion. The possibilities are multiple.

Religious Socialization

One obvious possibility is simple **religious socialization**—that teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood. Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents’ religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously. At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization. We think of this socialization as the “positive” side of the dynamic. But we also believe it is only part of the story.

Avoidance of Relationship Breakdown

A second social causal mechanism that we think connects strong parental religion to strong emerging adult religion is the more “negative” one of **the avoidance of relationship breakdown**. Most parents and children enjoy relationships—however imperfect—that they value and want to sustain. Parents and children in highly religious families, in

fact, enjoy even closer and happier relationships than those of the national average. When it comes to parents, children, and religion, when religious faith and practice are particularly important to parents, it is usually the case that they want it to also be important in the lives of their children. When the children accept, embrace, and practice that religious faith, therefore, the relationship tends to be affirmed and sustained. When their children neglect or reject that religious faith, the relationship tends to be threatened. Children of seriously religious parents who are generally invested in avoiding relational breakdown therefore have an incentive not to disregard the religious faith and practice that they (usually accurately) believe their parents want them to continue. Unless some other overriding factor comes into play, therefore, the consequence of not believing and of living as a nonreligious person is too costly to accept. So we think that in part in this way, too, religious commitment and practice is reproduced from one generation to the next.

We believe that strong parental religion is linked to higher emerging adult religion through at least two social causal mechanisms, one positive and one negative, of religious socialization and the avoidance of relational breakdown.

2. Adults in a Religious Congregation

A second factor associated with stronger emerging adult religion is the teenager *having more adults in a religious congregation to whom he or she can turn for support, advice, and help*. One social causal mechanism that we think helps create this statistical association is a **heightened enjoyment of religious congregational participation**. The more relationships in their religious congregations that teenagers enjoy with nonparental adults whose social statuses are superior to their own, the more likely they will be to experience involvement in their congregations as enjoyable and rewarding. They stand a great chance of actually looking forward to going to, rather than simply getting through, religious services. They are more likely to be drawn into more of the religious activities of the congregation. They are also more likely to shift their involvements in the religious congregations closer to the center instead of out on the periphery of their social lives overall. All of this has the effect of establishing for teenagers an active life in a religious

congregation as a valued priority to maintain even into emerging adulthood.

Besides this mechanism, we think two others are involved that are similar to those operating with the strong parental religion factor. The first is **religious socialization**. The more nonparental adults teenagers have in their religious congregations to whom they are personally tied, the more teachers and role models they have, coming from different social positions, to train them in the right believing and living of their faith. The second mechanism is **avoidance of relational breakdown**. Thus, emerging adults having histories of positive social ties to supportive nonparental adults in their teenage religious congregations will for these reasons increase the chances that they will remain religious committed and practicing five years later.

3. Devotional Practice: Prayer and Reading Scripture

A third key factor associated with stronger emerging adult religion is intense teenage devotional practice in the form of *frequent personal prayer* and *reading of scripture*. Why and how do these religious practices or what about them cause stronger emerging adult religion?

Religious Belief and Desire Reinforcement

One possibility is simply **religious belief and desire reinforcement**, the idea that praying and reading scripture cognitively and emotionally fortify the moral belief that being a committed and active person of faith is the right thing to do in life. We suppose here that acts of regular personal prayer and scripture reading are generally self-affirming and reinforcing, insofar as they help reinforce the believer's relationship with God, strength of personal faith, and understanding of and benefit from the practices themselves.

Habituation

The self-propagating dynamic then combines with processes of **habituation**, in which routines and habitual practices become established and so are easier to continue than to break. As a result of their reinforced beliefs and desires concerning religious devotion, emerging adults who as teenagers engaged in frequent and regular personal prayer and reading

of scripture prove more likely than those who did not to continue on as more highly committed believers, more capable of resisting countervailing forces and mechanisms that would reduce their religious commitments and practices.

Religious Capital

Another relevant mechanism is the tendency toward **conserving accumulated "religious capital."** The idea of religious practices generally, sociologically speaking, is that, like practicing at most things more broadly (e.g., a musical instrument, sports, speaking a foreign language), they train the one practicing to move closer toward excellence in exercising or expressing the skills, activity, or way of life in question. By practicing religion—through, for instance, prayer and scripture reading—one enhances one's ability to be a good believer, through greater familiarity and engagement with and knowledge about the religious faith. And as with most other things, generally, the more one practices religion, the more rewarding it becomes. In other words, the more one practices religion, generally the more capacity one builds up to benefit in various ways from belonging to and living out the faith. Some social scientists call this increased capacity and enjoyment "religious capital." Most people seek to avoid squandering accumulated religious capital and, rather, attempt to conserve, protect, and capitalize on it. If so, then young persons who as teenagers have invested themselves in the practices of frequent prayer and scripture reading will have as a result accumulated a quantity of religious capital that promises ongoing "payoffs" in the form of better informed, observed, performed, and therefore more fulfilling life of faith. To drop or dramatically discount that life of faith would mean to fail to use that accumulated religious capital. *So emerging adults who, through committed religious practices during their teenage years, have accumulated such religious capital will be more likely than those with less of it to capitalize on it by continuing strongly in the faith in which that capital is able to realize payoff.* Put differently, people who have not seriously practiced their faith in prior years simply have less to lose, in the way of religious capital, if they drop out of the faith than do those who have seriously practiced it. And so those who as teenagers prayed and read scripture a lot are more likely to tend to stick with the serious practice of their faith when they are older.

Drive for Identity Continuity

Religious practices not only work to accumulate religious capital. They also help to define, establish, and confirm religious identities. Persons who pray regularly become as a result known both to themselves and to others as more faithful religious persons than those who do not. The same is true about frequent scripture reading. The assumption here is that people have a strong interest in conserving their senses of self, of sustaining the continuity of their identities over time and space. Most emerging adults generally continue being essentially the same persons they have been in the past. So emerging adults who as teenagers, in part through their religious practices, established personal and social identities for themselves as people of serious religious faith will be more likely than those who were only moderately religious to continue forms of life that will sustain that serious religious identity. Having become a serious religious person in part through these practices, and having the interest in sustaining a continuity of identity that most people have, such a person will, other things being roughly equal, tend later in life to remain that kind of serious religious person.

4. High Teenage Importance of Religious Faith

Emerging adults who as teenagers reported higher importance of faith in everyday life proved more likely to remain most highly religious as 18- to 23-year olds. What social mechanisms are at work producing this effect? We think some of those already discussed do so. One is **religious belief and desire reinforcement**. Part of being someone for whom religious faith is highly important in everyday life itself involves embracing sets of particular beliefs and desires—about what is real, good, right, true, and worthy—that themselves commend the continuing investment in that religious faith. Thus cognitive and emotional forces operate to sustain the high importance of faith into the emerging adult years.

Another related mechanism is the drive for **identity continuity**. When people understand themselves to be the kind of selves for whom faith is highly important, the basic human interest in sustaining a continuously coherent identity will—all else being equal—tend to motivate them to remain

highly religious into future years. Also, if one is at one time a serious religious believer for whom faith is extremely important in one's life and then subsequently drops that religious aspect of one's identity, one then has some explaining to do in order to maintain a credible sense of reliable self to others.

This connects to the third social causal mechanism likely linking high teenager importance of faith and stronger emerging adult religion: **avoidance of relationship breakdown**. We know that teenagers for whom religious faith is highly important in their daily lives are much more likely than teens for whom faith is not important to enjoy social relationships with others who are also highly religious—parents, siblings, relatives, friends, and other adults in the religious congregations. For them to drop their highly religious way of life in the transition to emerging adulthood would probably cause damage to what are likely highly valued relationships. So there is a relational incentive to sustain and a disincentive to lose serious religious faith and practice.

5. Having No Doubts about Religious Beliefs

The causal mechanism at work here concerns elementary cognitive belief commitment. Commitment to the serious embrace and practice of faith normally requires accepting and trusting the rightness of those descriptive and normative religious beliefs. The more a believer questions or doubts them, the more susceptible over time he or she is to revising, discounting, or abandoning his or her associated religious faith and practice. By contrast, the faith of the believer who encounters fewer doubts about his or her religion is more likely to remain intact and maintained. Therefore, teenagers reporting that they have no doubts about their religious beliefs indicates possible negative and positive causal mechanisms at work. Negatively, it suggests that mental structures and life experiences are shielding them from cognitive and existential forces that could potentially undermine their religion. Positively, it indicates that their existing cognitive religious belief systems are formed in such a way as to be robust and resilient enough to withstand threats to faith. Such negative and positive mental operations achieving this kind of intellectual and existential security are important

cognitive mechanisms helping to sustain strong religious faith and practice over time.

6. Having Many Religious Experiences

The final key factor leading to higher emerging adult religion is teenagers *having many religious experiences*. Here this means having specifically committed their lives to God, having had definite answers to prayers, having experienced at least one miracle, *and* having one or more moving spiritual experiences. Many of the mechanisms already described would seem relevant to this factor. Such religious experiences should, in normal circumstances, reinforce religious cognitive belief commitments and desires. In a culture that puts such a high premium on the reliability and validity of individual subjective experience as American culture does, simply having personally had an answer to prayer, witnessed a divine miracle, or encountered an emotionally moving spiritual experience will tend to confirm and validate the larger religious faith associated with those experiences. They should help to make the religion more “real” and therefore personally reliable and important to believers. Such experiences are also often integral parts of religious socialization processes, as new or young members of religious communities come not simply to cognitively understand religious ideas but also to experience and personalize their faith for themselves. Furthermore, these religious experiences may in some cases heighten the enjoyment of participating in religious communities in which such experiences are normative. For many, they may enhance a sense of belonging and sharing in religious groups. Such religious experiences also tend to increase believers’ religious capital: their stocks of religious knowledge, familiarity, skills, and other learned resources that increase proficiency in understanding and practicing their faith. This in turn normally makes religious believers more invested in their faiths and so in continuing to sustain them. And all of this should work toward the formation of particular religious identities, which believers over time will tend to want to conserve, because of the drive for identity continuity. Any and all of these, we expect, will work causally toward producing stronger rather than weaker religious faith and practice into the future.

Summary of Theoretical Mechanisms Leading to Higher Religiosity in Emerging Adults

Theoretical Mechanism	Description	Significant Variables Supporting Operation
Socialization	Values, behaviors, and beliefs are transmitted from important others to youth through formal teaching and informal modeling	- Strong parental religion - Supportive religious adults
Avoidance of Relationship Breakdown	Youth act in ways toward shared agreement to maintain valued relationships	- Strong parental religion - Support religious adults - High importance of religious faith
Enjoyment of participation rewarding continuation	Intrinsically rewarding activities are more likely to be continued to be pursued and have its associated messages internalized	- Supportive religious adults - High importance of religious faith
Belief and desire reinforcement	Cognitively and emotionally solidifying and fortifying one’s beliefs about what is true, good, and right in life	- Frequently praying & reading scripture - High importance of religious faith - Many religious experiences
Habituation	Meaningful behaviors that become routine and practices are more likely to be continued in the future	- Frequently praying - Frequently reading scripture
Conserving accumulated religious capital	Investment in activities and communities accrues potential benefits, which discontinuing participation in would eliminate	- Frequently praying - Frequently reading scripture - Supportive religious adults
Drive for identity continuity	Desire to maintain one’s sense of who one is and presentation of that self to others	- Frequently praying & reading scripture - High importance of religious faith - Many religious experiences
Cognitive belief commitment	Embracing a belief system that explains lived reality and provides direction for one’s life	- Having no doubts about religious beliefs

The Timing of First Commitments to God

We have shown that youth committing to live their lives for God is one important religious experience that is among the most important factors in leading teenagers into the highest levels of emerging adult religion. How many American teenagers and emerging adults commit their lives to God and at what ages do they do it? Analyzing the data from all of the surveys (teens and emerging adults) reveals the following.

- **31 percent of respondents reported never committing to God as a teenager or emerging adult.** And on the basis of what we know, one can expect that few of them probably ever will.
- **58.8 percent made their first commitment to live their lives for God before the age of 14.** Most of these probably committed to God during the childhood years.
- **5.3 percent appear to have made a first commitment to live their lives for God during the teenage years (14-17).**
- **4.9 percent reported committing their lives to God after the age of 18 (18-to 23-years old).**

The vast majority, then, of those youth—85 percent—who have by the age of 18-23 ever committed to live their lives for God appear to have made their first commitment before age 14. These findings complement and reinforce one of the larger stories of this research: that *the religious commitments and orientations of most people appear to be set early in life* and very likely follow a consistent trajectory from the early formation through the adolescent and into the emerging adult years. Some young people do make dramatic shifts into lower and higher religious commitments and practices later in life that would not be expected from their early life experiences and formation. But they are a minority. Most are set early in life to follow one religious trajectory or another—mostly, we showed earlier, formed by the religious lives of

their parents and by social connections to their congregations and embraced in personal religious beliefs and practices—which they tend to follow as they grow into emerging adulthood. When it comes to commitment to God, it is not that experiences and changes during the teenage and emerging adult years do not matter religiously for people—they do, especially for some. It is instead simply that *what matters for most even more is what happens religiously before the teenage years, which powerfully conditions most of everything that happens thereafter.*

A Summary of the Findings

Standing back and reviewing this article's findings about religious trajectories from the teenage to the emerging adult years, what has been revealed?

1. It is apparent that among a host of possibly significant factors operative during the teenage years, certain ones powerfully shape emerging adult outcomes, others are significant but not as consistent or potent, and yet others exert little to no influence on outcomes. Frequent teenage personal prayer, for instance, is more influential than having a lot of religious friends, and both are more important than going on missions or service trips. Likewise, having highly religious parents matters more than attending Sunday school, but both of those are more significant than attending a religious high school.
2. It is apparent that the most influential of these shaping forces are not only technically significant statistically but make differences of sizeable magnitudes in substantive outcomes. Among these are personal prayer, parental religious commitments, important of faith, religious doubts, and personal religious experiences. The variance observed in emerging adult religious outcomes related to these most crucial factors is very large. They really do seem to make important differences.
3. It is apparent that in the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years, the religious lives of youth in the process are not thrown up into the air to land in a random jumble. To the contrary, where youth end up religiously as emerging adults is highly governed

by the nature of their religious upbringings, commitments, and experiences in earlier years. Most lives during this transition into emerging adulthood, in other words, reflect a great amount of continuity with the past.

4. The important factors shaping adult outcomes noted above tend *not* to operate in isolation with sufficient independent effects on outcomes but rather conglomerate in various combinations to exert their strongest effects. General factors that seem consistently to be at work are strong relational ties to religious faith, embrace of and commitment to religious faith, and the frequent practice of religious devotion. Combinations of these factors are also most important in determining who among the most highly religious teenagers will remain highly religious as emerging adults and who will shift down to the less religious half of emerging adults.
5. Using growth mixture modeling, we showed that about half of today's emerging adults have sustained religiously stable lives over five years, at distinctly high, medium, and low levels; that most of the balance (almost half of emerging adults) has declined religiously, either moderately or sharply, during the same time; and that a small group (about 3 to 6 percent) has significantly increased in religious faith and practice since the teenage years.
6. Approximately 70 percent of youth who at some time or other before mid-emerging adulthood commit to live their lives for God, the vast majority appear to do so early in life, apparently before the age of 14. Some make first commitments to God during their teenage years and others as emerging adults, but these are the minority. Most make their first commitments to God as children or during the preteen or very early teen years. Many religious trajectories followed in the course of life's development seem to be formed early on in life.
7. Going to college no longer seems to corrode the religious faith and practice of students as it did in decades past. New evidence is accumulating, including these findings, that for various reasons, since the 1990s, higher education has not been undermining the religion of students as it did for prior generations.

8. Internal, subjective religion and external, public religion tend strongly to go together in coherent packages. The NSYR's findings indicate that the common idea that emerging adults remain subjectively highly committed to religious faith even though their outward religious practices significantly contract is false, a myth. When the public practice of religion declines among emerging adults, for the vast majority, their internal, subjective interest in faith does as well. Religion, it would seem, tends to be lived in fairly consistent bundles of expression and engagement.

To summarize most briefly, religious outcomes in emerging adulthood are not random happenstances about which all bets are off after age 18. Instead, they often flow quite predictably from formative religious influences that shape persons' lives in early years. The transition into emerging adulthood is clearly accompanied by a significant amount of religious decline among many. But even that decline is quite predictable, using information about the set of the most important factors that lead to decline. Furthermore, the lives of many teenagers who are transitioning into the emerging adult years reflect a lot more religious stability and continuity than is commonly realized. Everything simple does not change. The past continues to shape the future. This is important to know, because it means that religious commitments, practices, and investments made during childhood and the teenage years, by parents and others in families and religious communities, matter—they make a difference. Appreciating the stabilities and continuities that usually override unpredictable changes also reinforces the basic sociological insight that people's lives are profoundly formed by the social networks and institutions that socialize them, that the relational and social structures that compose and order life are not easily changed or inexplicably made irrelevant. Again, who people are is very much a product of where they are socially located, of what social and relational forces that have formed their lives. And who people are usually does not randomly and unaccountably change over time. ***What people have been in the past is generally the best indicators of why they are what they are in the present and what they will likely be in the future. That is a fact that needs to condition the understanding of emerging adult religion.***



Young Adults in a Changing Church

Shannyn Magee

The future of American religion is in the hands of adults now in their twenties and thirties... Younger adults are not only the future of American religion; they are already a very significant part of it. They are at least a sizeable minority in most congregations.

*(Robert Wuthnow, *After the Babyboomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*)*

At 30 years of age, as an ordained pastor in the ELCA, I am well below the average age of participants in the church and members sitting in the pews. I see few people in my age bracket when I attend worship and I wonder, “Am I alone?” I then leave church and head to the YMCA for a workout and find that I am surrounded by many young adults. I think of my morning in the church building and my afternoon at the YMCA and I wonder, “Where is the disconnect?”

Following my workout, I head to the coffee shop with a group of six friends between the ages of 24 and 35. We sit around the table with our lattes and I share with them my view from the pulpit as I looked out to a sea of gray and white hair interspersed with a few families bouncing toddlers on their knees or entertaining the five year old with Cheerios and a coloring book. As a young adult, I am concerned. Some of my peers are here and present in the faith community but many are not. Does this mean that young adults do not desire a life of faith? Do they not desire a faith community? Sitting around the table with our coffee I hear the stories of my friends who are spiritual on different levels and hear the heartache of many who want to be involved in a faith community but do not know how to enter into one or cannot find one to their liking. How do we address this disconnect between the faithful lives of young adults and lack of involvement in a faith community?

Young adults, statistically, are not a booming population in a church. Statistics show that the number of young adults unaffiliated with a religion is now at 26%. Young adults who attend religious services weekly or more than once a week is at 18% (Pew Research). In my survey of 634 young adults, ages 25-35, 71.8% stated they engaged in daily prayer or scripture reading and 71.1% engage in spiritual or religious practices or development centered on Christian beliefs. In addition, 88.6% stated they have an interest or desire to grow

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spiritually. If 559 people out of 634 want to grow spiritually, why are they not in a faith community and how can congregations connect with a population so eager and willing to engage in faith development?

Ministry with Young Adults Today

An important approach to the young adult population is to enter not with exasperation or defeat but with a willingness to look through a new lens and see a new view for how ministry is or can be done. In the past young adult ministry has focused around “singles groups” or glorified high school ministry, mostly because with such a transitory population, communities do not know what to do with this lost population and young adults do not see themselves fitting into a specific mold of existing ministries. So they respond in a way that they know: to bring people together around food or fellowship, but lacking a vibrant faith formation.

Young adult ministry is difficult because young adults are going through their own crises and are in a constant state of transition for a number of years. Twentysomethings and early thirtysomethings often go through what is termed a “Quarterlife Crisis” (see Robbins). This quarterlife crisis occurs when the young adult leaves the structure and predictability of an academic institution and now has to figure out “what to do” with their life, career, and relationships. At this point in their lives there is the unwritten expectation that a young adult knows what they want to do with their life and will follow through based on past education. The truth is that when twentysomethings enter the “real” world, it is accompanied by anxiety, fear, and stress. Often times they have left a world they have known for their whole lives and are thrust into a place with new people, new routines, and new expectations. Identity is focused on a career path, but when a young adult does not have a clear career path, they can feel the loss of their identity. Because of the uncertainties and doubt surrounding their lives, young adults often encounter depression and anxiety. However, because this crisis is so rarely named, and because young adults often do not have the resources, or because they feel there is shame associated with anxiety and depression, there are few statistics surrounding the young adult age group

between the ages of 21 and 35 (Robbins, 6). What does it mean for the church to view young adults as emergent adults and not as old high schoolers or as settled adults and provide ministry opportunities and faith formation to this group that has unique characteristics?

The culture of young adults has changed since the years of the Baby Boomers. Statistics show that young adults are now marrying later. In 2002 the average age of marriage for women was 25.3 years and for men 26.9 years as compared to 20.3 years for women and 22.8 years for men in 1950 (Wuthnow, 22). In the span of about a generation, people were marrying an average of four years later.

It is also true that churches tend to be a couples- and/or family-oriented community which can be intimidating to a young adult. Humans are communal creatures and to enter into a church and sit alone, even surrounded by people you know or are acquainted with, can still be uncomfortable. It can often be a reminder of what you do not have or how you do not fit into a “social norm” regardless of whether or not you enjoy being single. It has been shown that while in their early twenties only 12% of men and 22% of women are married, the majority of people, across all age groups including young adults, believe that younger adults should be “settled,” meaning independent living, finished with school, and fully employed, by the age of 21 and able to support a family before the age of 25 (Wuthnow, 28). This puts a lot of pressure on young adults to “measure up” even when a large majority of young adults do not fit into that mold of expectations.

The other truth about young adults in this age bracket is they tend to be very self-focused. This is not said with a negative connotation, however. Young adults are establishing their careers, their peer groups, relationships, and communities. With only 24 hours in a day, young adults often have to prioritize their time around the new and overwhelming tasks of day to day life. To spend an hour a week or more in a place that initially can feel uncomfortable they will often choose to spend that time elsewhere. That said, young adults will come “out of the woodwork” when there is a specific purpose or service project to be had because there is a feeling of community and goal orientation, and there is a specific beginning and end time.

These understandings of young adults allow us to enter into the conversation of what spirituality looks like for the young adult population and how

can faith communities engage these people with a center based in popular theology and Christian life.

Young Adults & Intergenerational Connections

As we look at young adult ministry the question to ask is: “How does young adult ministry fit in with the mission of God as it pertains to God’s work in the world?” When we think of faith communities it helps to think theologically about *why* we should care if young adults are present. In the most raw, blunt form, faith communities are meant to be intergenerational. Holly Catterton Allen states, “Faith communities are perhaps the only places where families, singles, couples, children, teens, grandparents—all generations—come together on a regular interacting basis” (Allen, 3).

We learn across the generations and gain wisdom from other people of various ages. Imagine these scenarios:

A 25 year old male shares his story at a Sunday morning adult education class about searching for faith in the midst of doubt during his college and post college years. This leads into scripture readings from Paul’s letters in the New Testament and discussion among the adults present. A 63 year old man, sitting near the 25 year old young adult, shares his own story of being a young father who lost a 3 year old child to cancer and his search for God in the midst of despair. The 63 year vividly shares his anger and his doubts about God at that time but also shares his experience of encountering God in the midst of pain. His story lifts up his journey of doubt and resonates with the young man of 25. The conversation between the two men continues after the education hour and they agree to meet for coffee the following Tuesday. A relationship of mentorship, vibrancy, and holy friendship has been made through shared experiences and wisdom passed from one person’s experience to another sitting in the middle of a similar experience.

A 28 year old seminary student is writing a sermon for her preaching class. She is struggling with what the text is saying in the midst of her community and how the Holy Spirit is speaking through the words in scripture. Frustrated and in a time crunch she leads a high school group in

devotion by reading the text twice out loud and asking the high schoolers what they think the text is saying to them. The 9th-12th graders share their insights, their thoughts, and their understanding of the scripture passage. The young seminary student writes down all their thoughts and takes the list home to ponder. Out of those notes develops a strong sermon and the true voice of God among the people in the world here and now.

A 48 year old female connects with a 30 year old female in the congregation. They share similar interests centered on athletics and fitness. Because of this shared interest the 48 year old invites the 30 year old to work out with a group of people that span the ages of 24-62, all who are people of faith. Not only has the 30 year old now met new peers her own age, she finds out that these people focus their lives with Christ at the center. She sees the 48 year old and her husband being generous stewards of money, time, and abilities within their church and community. She watches and observes how they pass on faith to their children and engage in faith discussion with people in the community through their vocations. The 30 year old finds a surrogate family when she is far away from her own family and also now has positive, faithful role models while being able to mentor and interact with the couple’s young children.

None of these scenarios would happen without intergenerational ministry within the church, whether that ministry is communal worship, Bible study, small groups, or fellowship. Young adults yearn for intergenerational connection because of the shared experiences and the ability to gain assistance from outside themselves.

Single Young Adults

One of the struggles with young adult ministry comes about because of the cultural stage of young singles. When young adult ministry is present in a congregation, it is often focused around the needs of young families. This is because young families often come back to church after a hiatus so that the children can engage in Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and other children’s ministry. Carol Howard Merritt astutely writes, “We often think of singleness as something temporary, a stage that a person goes through before she ‘settles down.’ We

think of her not so much as being single as simply not yet married” (Merritt, 16). The struggle with young adult ministry is to be encompassing of the whole person and not segregating people by their current jobs or vocations, their singleness, or being coupled with or without children. The often hard to strike balance for young adult ministry is for it to be about faith formation rather than unintentionally reminding young adults about what they are not (often times identified within career) or what they do not have (often times identified within a family structure).

Thinking Theologically about Ministry with Young Adults

As faith communities encounter young adult ministry, the community must approach this age group with a theological understanding of their vision and overall goal. Is the faith community focused on *Functional Christianity* or *Missional Christianity*? Depending on the vision and goals of the faith community, these views will often indicate whether or not young adults will be a vibrant and active part of the congregation.

Functional Christianity is essentially an organized institution that oversees orthodoxy, proper administration of the sacraments, and regulation of spiritualization. With Functional Christianity comes the notion of proper management, a conception of the leader as the one who makes things happen and the measuring of quantitative growth (see Roxburgh and Romanuk). When a ministry works with a view of Functional Christianity the young adult population has a greater chance of becoming lost because they are not as drawn to structure and regularity as to faith development and spiritual growth. This is where Missional Christianity enters the picture. Missional Christianity focuses on God’s people participating in God’s world and is open to a great flexibility of structure and definition. A Missional Christianity focuses spirituality on working from the hands to the heart to the head. Mission can be defined as “...not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposed to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history” (Guder, 4). When mission

is the focus, the hands, the head and the heart are all engaged. The main difference between Functional Christianity and Missional Christianity is ecclesiocentric vs. theocentric.¹

There is good reason to think theocentrically about church and young adults. Kathryn Tanner in her book *Theories of Culture* addresses the need for thinking theologically outside of structure. She states, “Theology is often identified with the productions of educated elites such as clergy and academics... As such a highly specialized intellectual activity, theology seems irrelevant to the common concerns of most people. Putting theology into the cultural context of a Christian way of life challenges this view of theology; it makes theology much more an integral part of daily life.” (Tanner, 69) Theology is a deep and direct concern for people in their day to day life, including young adults. With 88.6% of the young adult population wanting to grow spiritually, there is not a lack of interest in theology. The difference is when theology encounters their real life and is not set apart as an academic discipline. When they encounter the living Word, they are drawn into the relevance of the Holy Spirit working in their daily life.² This relevance is what young adults are searching for when they enter a church, hear a sermon, or engage in a discussion of faith. Academic theology has to engage every day theology in a way that allows a conversation to produce meaning. Academic theology needs to be concerned with its connection to every day Christian practice (Tanner, 71). When this gap is lessened, the more people are engaged in the mission of God. Full participation in a faith community does not require detailed understanding, which allows us to take a view of the church that holds the potential for numerous interpretations.

As we engage in popular theology, the young adult population has a great opportunity to share their doubts, their beliefs, and their struggles whether that is in an organized religious institution or in faith communities outside the norm of “church.” All of us are theologians, but everyday theology is messy and not congruent. If academic theology does not meet people where they are at, the proposal for change is not worthwhile. Therefore, academic theology must engage in dialogue with popular theologies (Tanner, 85). Tanner states,

In its primary tasks of articulating and making a coherent system of Christian matters, [churches]

must attend to what people already think, meeting at least some of their theological concerns, talking in much the same terms, correcting popular theological opinion where necessary and in ways that will seem defensible to this broader audience. If their results are to influence every day life, the primary investigations of specialized theologians must weigh the desire to alter and correct what Christians say and do against the need to gain widespread appeal. (Tanner 85-86)

What does this mean? It means that we—Christians, leaders, and members of the church—need to essentially meet people at their starting points without judgment and without a “plan to convert,” and trust the Holy Spirit from there. This can allow understanding, tolerance, and the expansion of spiritual and religious growth.

Spirituality and Religious Involvement of Young Adults: Insights from a Survey

Trends in research among young adults either clump this emergent group into the ages of 18-29 or splits them into two groups between under 30 and between 30-49. Even within the young adult or emergent adulthood groups there are sub groups present. One subgroup is the post-high school/college age of 18-23 and what I call the “young professional” age when young adults are establishing careers, relationships, and families between the ages of 23 and 35. Therefore, I chose to engage in a survey with young adults ages 23-35 to find the trends of spirituality and religious involvement among those ages. A total of 634 young adults were surveyed online, representing a wide cross section across the United States; 25% of the respondents were male and 75% female. There were not real differences between the male and female responses to the survey. Here are the total group’s responds to the seven survey questions.

	Yes	No
1. Do you engage in prayer and/or Bible reading?	71.9%	28.1%
2. Are you a regular worship participant in a religious or church organization? (once a month or more)	61.5%	38.5%
3. Do you feel part of the community within a religious or church organization?	59.1%	40.9%
4. Do you participate in church-organized activities or worship leadership (Examples: choir, music, committees, volunteer or service opportunities, Bible study, etc.)	47.9%	52.1%
5. Do you engage in spiritual or religious practices or development centered on the Christian beliefs?	71.4%	28.6%
6. If you are <u>not</u> engaged in a faith community, do you have an interest or desire to be part of a faith community? (267 respondents completed this question)	49.2%	50.8%
7. Do you have any interest or desire to grow spiritually?	88.7%	11.3%

In the Summer 2009 edition of the *Lifelong Faith* journal, John Roberto and a team of colleagues presented the first version of a working paper on “Faith Formation 2020: Envisioning the Future of Faith Formation.” In this project four scenarios for the future of faith formation in the year 2020 were developed in a matrix describing what faith formation could possibly look like between the year 2010 and 2020. The matrix was developed around two uncertainties facing faith formation in churches over the next decade: “People’s Hunger for God and the Spiritual Life” (Low to High), and “The Culture’s Resistance or Receptiveness to Organized Religion.” The four scenarios are not predictions but rather a way to express the range of possible futures facing congregational faith formation in the next decade. (See the brief descriptions of the four scenarios at the end of the article. Go to www.LifelongFaith.com for more information.)

Faith Formation 2020 Scenarios

Receptive to Organized Religion

Scenario #4: Participating in Church Activities, but Faith and Spiritual Life Are Not Important	Scenario #1: Vibrant Faith and Active Engagement in the Church Community
Hunger for God and	the Spiritual Life
Low	High
Scenario #3: Unaffiliated & Uninterested	Scenario #2: Spiritual, but Not Religious

Resistance to Organized Religion

The analysis of the seven survey questions provided a way to identify what percentage of people's responses fell into each scenario. The percentages were developed by taking each of the seven questions and placing the percentage of yes and percentage of no into the appropriate scenario. For example: "Are you a regular worship participant (once a month or more) in a religious or church organization?" The 61.5% yes responses were placed into Scenario #1 and Scenario #4, while the 38.5% no responses were recorded in Scenario #2 and Scenario #3. After all of the survey questions were tabulated for in each quadrant, the number was divided by the number of questions, producing a final percentage as the result.

Young Adult Survey Responses

Scenario #4: Participating in Church Activities, but Faith and Spiritual Life Are Not Important	Scenario #1: Vibrant Faith and Active Engagement in the Church Community
34.2% of the 367 Respondents Engaged in a Faith Community	66.7% of the 367 Respondents Engaged in a Faith Community
Scenario #3: Unaffiliated and Uninterested	Scenario #2: Spiritual, but Not Religious
35.8% of the 267 Respondents Not Engaged in a Faith Community	59.1% of the 267 Respondents Not Engaged in a Faith Community

These results are surprising to me. It makes me wonder if the survey did not get as clear of a cross section of people as I had thought because based on what we are seeing with participation of young adults in church life and workshop. Scenario #1 appears to be the strongest in terms of survey responses. It raises the question of people's interpretations and views of their participation, activity, or connectedness to a faith community versus what is actually lived out from a non-biased observer.³ It was not surprising that Scenario #2, "Spiritual but Not Religious," had a high percentage. This is what appears to be true in the research of Christian Smith on emerging adults between the ages of 18-22 (see *Souls in Transition*), as well as in the research of the Barna Group and Pew Research Center.

How do my findings, of a survey completed by 634 young adults passed on mostly through email and Facebook invitations, compare to the Pew Research study on millennials? The difference in the research is that my survey was based on an age range of 23-35 year olds while the Pew Research divides young adults into two groups: 29 years old or younger and 30-45 years of age. Using the Pew research on the 29 year old and younger group, 26% of young adults are less religiously affiliated as compared to 47.5% in my own research. Religious attendance, according to Pew, is 33% compared to 61.5% in my study. Young adults engaged in prayer or Bible reading is 37.5% in the Pew study, compared to 71.8% in my study. These are large differences and it can make us wonder about the differences between the emerging adults (18-22) and young adults who are 23-35.

What is exciting about these results is that while statistics in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (as an example of one denomination) show the young adult population less likely to people of vibrant faith and religious growth, when given a voice young adults *are* seeing themselves as connected to faith and church, whether or not they are worshipping regularly or not. The responses in the three scenarios that indicate a hunger for God and the spiritual life and receptiveness to organized religion are high. The lower responses in the "Unaffiliated and Uninterested" scenario suggest that this is perhaps not of the great concern which we continue hear about. These results open conversations for congregations and provide hope. My research shows a trend that a large number of young adults are spiritually hungry and that a

significant group cares about organized religion. Therefore, as Christian churches we should not stop trying to engage young adults in ministry within the church and out in the community.

Directions for Ministry with Young Adults

Ultimately, the goal and mission of the church is not to get people into an institution but to foster vibrant faith. Because young adults are at various stages in their faith journeys, there needs to be an intentional focus on how to reach out and engage young adults at each stage. It is important for focus to be on the journey that accompanies spiritual growth rather than just the outcome. A “one size fits all” approach will not work because each stage is unique and requires a focus on the different areas for growth. It cannot be assumed that young adults know how to live and grow in their faith.

The results from Pew Research Center, Christian Smith and the National Study on Youth and Religion, and my survey lead us to a main focus: Young adults want to and are willing to grow spiritually. The golden ticket is finding a connection between orthodoxy, theology, and daily practice. We often think that to engage young adults in ministry we need to build a brand new community. I believe we can engage young adults in existing communities if we take time to re-imagine what church looks like and re-imagine what it means to be a faith community. If we take time to focus on the center of our beliefs such as the sacraments and creed as opposed to what defines churches and denominations at the borders such as sexuality or politics, then we are better able to engage as people of faith. It is not consensus that holds a faith community together, it is the common investments. For example, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) the common investments are Word and sacrament and Christian community. What drives this then is the ability to be evangelical, to reach out and engage people in the work of God, so we are able to hold on to what the living Word is doing in and among a group of people who are called, gathered, and scattered.

With a majority of people interested in growing spiritually and many wanting to grow religiously, let us explore what it means to think about church in different ways. The mechanism of the church is only

as good as its ability to help what a Christian says and does. We need to look at different angles in which to engage young adults and meet young adults where they are experiencing life.

Life Milestones

Many people who participate in church, but are not particularly spiritual, define church by life milestones such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, the baptism of children, and funerals. If these milestones are primary for the church, how can we engage people around these life milestones in order to be inviting as a community and surround them with faithful mentors, spiritual friends, and deep seated theology that is applicable to daily life? Religious traditions are the entry way for engaging young adults in faith formation. If we meet young adults at their milestones, they may come back.

Let us start with an idea around baptismal sponsors and mentors who meet with young parents prior to the baptism of their child. These sponsors and mentors teach what it means to welcome a child into the family of God, marked by the cross of Christ forever, and to live out the baptismal promises as the child grows. These mentors can walk with the parents not only through the baptism time but follow-up with the parents each year on the birthday of the baptism of the child, intentionally invite the parents to small groups where they can learn how to pray with their child, teach their child to read the Bible, and live boldly their Christian life. Oftentimes, parents struggle with knowing how to bring faith into the daily life of the home. Congregations can provide the resources and tools needed for faith formation within the home.⁴

As young people enter into Confirmation, congregations can think about holding faith formation not only for the teenagers but for the adults who mentor, guide, and teach youth. In addition, focusing on doubt and questions that youth or adults have which then leads into teaching and discussion on belief and faith, allows for engagement of all people within the popular and practical theology of life, thus encountering the living Word in daily life and making relevant the gospel message.

The next milestone is often marriage. Congregations that are able to foster pre-marital faith formation as well as counseling and wedding preparation can prepare a couple for a life lived with Christ at the center of their marriage. This can take

place through small group learning, either on a one time or continuing basis, providing couples with resources of how to grow together spiritually, and connecting couples with people their own age as well as seasoned couples within the congregation who can act as mentors to the couple. Mentorships do not necessarily need to be in-depth, but focus around caring conversation and invitation around a dinner table, coffeehouse, or phone conversation. This is where intergenerational ministry and connections can occur as people of faith come together and are introduced. These are the personal, trusted relationships that pass on faith (see Hill and Anderson).

Finally, funerals can be a deeply spiritual time but also a time for anger, despair, and doubt. The loss can be a grandparent, parent, sibling, or other family member or friend. When congregations are able to provide support and spiritual guidance for people who are grieving and teach the theology of the cross in the midst of despair, they are able to gather in a generation who is primed for hearing the gospel and finding hope in the resurrection.⁵

Notice, none of these suggestions or ideas are “programs” per se, but engage people at the milestones of their lives and provide opportunities to invite others (evangelism) and provide opportunities to grow spiritually.

Reaching the “Spiritual, but Not Religions”

There is also a constituent of people to be reached who identify themselves as being spiritual but not religious. Falling into this category are also what, I believe, is a decent percentage of people who are spiritual and *want* to be religious but do not know how to be religious. This can be because they were not raised in a church setting, they have been disenchanted by the setting or denomination in which they grew up, or have not found a community where they feel welcome, comfortable, or that is a good “fit.” People who are spiritual but not religious allow for great imagination and thinking outside the box as we think about church in a completely different way. Drawing on my experience of coffee with my YMCA buddies, we often find ourselves in faith conversation and prayer with one another even though only two out of the six people around the table are “regular church-goers.” How can church be

found in a coffeehouse with people sitting around in sweaty workout clothes enjoying coffee?

There is the false belief among church leaders that all young adult ministry should be outside the church walls and while I do not agree with that pattern for *all* young adult ministry, I do believe it holds a very valuable place especially when attempting to engage young adults who are spiritual but not religious. The idea of a “third place” is useful when engaging a group who has either been disenchanted by organized religion or do not feel comfortable entering a church sanctuary. A common idea to reach this group is to engage in a “theology pub” where young adults can meet for a drink outside the church walls in their common meeting grounds, not only to interact socially but to discuss the theological questions that may be entering their minds or pulling at their hearts. Gathering together in the home of a peer who is willing to lead a spiritual discussion or Bible study allows for church to take place outside of the traditional church building. Music, prayer, and Scripture can all be components of this gathering but it takes place in a “safer” environment that fosters small group learning and intentional connection with one another. People can even take turns leading these small gatherings so each person has a chance to prepare a Bible study and dig deeper into their Biblical and theological learning.

By meeting people in places where they feel comfortable and naturally engage in spiritual discussion along with popular theology, a door has been opened to engage young adults in faith formation. Often times if young adults are engaged spiritually they may be willing and feel more comfortable and able to engage religiously as well. Within this particular group service opportunities also provide a safe place to use their hands while connecting their heart to faith. Young adults come “out of the woodwork” for service opportunities because they see a true need and value, and many young adults have a passion for social justice in some way. Through the invitation to live their faith and work shoulder-to-shoulder with their peers, some may be willing to take the next step into a caring community of believers.⁶

Young Adults of Vibrant Faith

Finally, let us focus on the population that considers themselves actively engaged within a church community and living a vibrant faith. This is the

population that is already seen within the church building, volunteers, takes on leadership roles, participates in events, and is present in the faith community. That said, it is important to continue walking with these young adults as many life transitions are still occurring. They may not be in need of a “mom” or “dad” but to be surrounded by a caring community can be priceless as young adults transition through life stages of potential careers, relationships, marriage, and families. Rituals and traditions, in conjunction with peers their own age and across generations, are going to continue to engage the young adults in the community and continue to make them feel a welcomed and valuable member of the community as well as continued journeys together in faith.

Conclusion

Development in these three areas—“Vibrant Faith and Active Engagement in the Church Community,” “Spiritual but Not Religious,” and “Participating in Church Activities but Faith and the Spiritual Life Are Not Important”—allow for an increase in spiritual formation as well as provide a flow for people to move from one quadrant to another either by deepening their spiritual or religious commitment and/or their engagement with the faith community..

The church is changing now and young adults are making an impact by their presence *and* their non-presence. We will experience the effects of the current state of our churches in relations to young adults for the next ten years. If we truly want to draw young adults into transformational spiritual and Christian lives then we must continue to re-imagine the Christian church and our local faith communities, and how we foster a vibrant faith in the lives of young adults.

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End Notes

- ¹ Ecclesiocentric concerns itself theologically with the nature, constitutions, and functions of a church. Theocentric concerns itself with having God as the focal point of thoughts, interests, and feelings.
- ² I often cringe using the word “relevant” because within the context of youth or young adult ministry it can have the connotation that to be relevant one must dress a certain way, listen to a particular kind of music, and “be cool.” This is not my definition of relevant in ministry. My definition is people understanding God’s work in this world through Scripture, through the Gospel message, and through the work of the Holy Spirit.
- ³ One young adult interviewed face-to-face stated that she had not been to church except for holidays since her priest left three years ago, but still considers herself to be a “regular church-goer” and “spiritual” thus placing her into Scenario #1 by her own definition.
- ⁴ Vibrant Faith Ministries (www.vibrantfaith.org) has numerous resources for bring faith into the home and equipping people of all ages to pass on faith.
- ⁵ *The Promise of Despair* by Andrew Root (Abington Press, 2010) provides a good understanding of what

it means to encounter Jesus on the cross in the midst of despair in life.

⁶ St. Matthews Lutheran Church in Walnut Creek, CA is a congregation that is thinking between the lines and meeting people between membership and disengagement. Go to: www.saintmatthew.org.

The Four Scenarios

Scenario #1. Vibrant Faith and Active

Engagement in the Church Community. *The first scenario describes a world in which people of all ages and generations are actively engaged in a Christian church, are spiritually committed, and growing in their faith. People have found their spiritual home within an established Christian tradition and a local faith community that provides a variety of ways for them to grow in faith and live their faith in the world.*

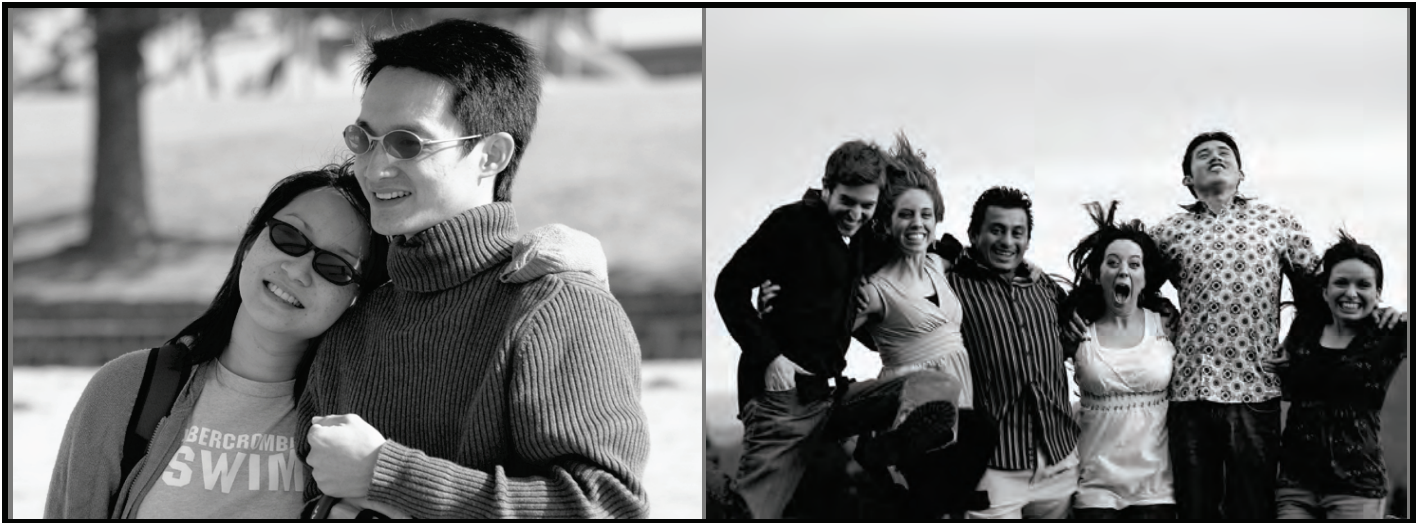
Scenario #2. Spiritual, but Not Religious. *The second scenario describes a world in which people are spiritually hungry and searching for God and the spiritual life, but not usually involved with organized religion and established Christian churches. Churches recognize that they need to establish a presence in the world of people who are spiritually hungry but not attracted to an established Christian church. e.*

Scenario #3. Unaffiliated and Uninterested. *The third scenario describes a world in which people experience little need for God and the spiritual life and are not affiliated with organized religion and established Christian churches. The task of the church is to be incarnational—placing itself in the midst of the culture and the gathering places of people—and be a witness to the Christian faith in the world today*

Scenario #4. Participating in Church Activities, but Faith and the Spiritual Life Are Not Important. *The fourth scenario describes a world in which people attend church activities, but are not actively engaged in their church community. They may participate in significant seasonal and sacramental celebrations; some may even attend worship regularly. Their connection to the church is more social than spiritual. Churches recognize that belonging (engagement) leads to believing (commitment) and a more vibrant faith, and seek ways to increase engagement with the community and the religious tradition to develop more spiritually committed members.*

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Emerging Adult Participation in Congregations

Conrad Hackett

In this essay, I provide information about the congregational participation of emerging adults (ages 18 to 29) in the United States.¹ These results are based on my analysis of data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, which was completed in worship services by over 100,000 adults in 436 congregations during the weekend of April 29, 2001. This analysis focuses on the subsample of adults in 399 Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant congregations.²

The U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) provides information about people attending a sample of American congregations designed to be representative of those typically attended by American adults.³ This dataset has two unique strengths for the purposes of this essay. First, it includes a large number of emerging adults (over 10,000) surveyed in the congregations they attend. Second, it collects extensive information about the background, participation, and attitudes of these emerging adults.

This report is organized in five sections. First, I describe the prevalence of emerging adults in congregations. Second, I describe the demographic characteristics of these emerging adults. Third, I describe how they are involved in congregational life. Fourth, I analyze what emerging adults value in congregations. Finally, I analyze the demographic and theological characteristics of congregations with an above-average concentration of emerging adults.

1. How Common Are Emerging Adults in Congregations?

Emerging adults are twice as common in the general population as they are in congregations. According to data from the Census Bureau, in 2001, the emerging adult age group made up 22% of the adult population in the United States.⁴ In contrast, emerging adults made up slightly less than 10% of the total adult population in

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(This article is reprinted with permission from the Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults Project, a Lilly Endowment project to conduct research on young adults both in and out of churches, and then communicate that research to ministry practitioners in helpful ways. www.changingsea.org.)

the congregational sample.

The concentration of emerging adults varies considerably among congregations in different religious traditions (see Table 1). Evangelical Protestant congregations have the highest concentration of emerging adults (14%), followed by Catholic parishes (10%), and mainline Protestant congregations (6%).

The concentration of emerging adults in congregations also varies by census region. Overall, emerging adults are concentrated most highly in congregations in the West (12%). However, the West is also the region with the lowest concentration of emerging adults in mainline Protestant congregations (4%).

Table 1: Percentage of emerging adults in congregations by census region and religious tradition (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	All Churches
Northeast	5%	7%	14%	8%
Midwest	7%	8%	16%	9%
South	6%	9%	11%	9%
West	4%	12%	17%	12%
National Average	6%	10%	14%	10%

2. What Are the Traits of Emerging Adults in Congregations?

This section describes the breakdown of emerging adults in these congregations by marital status, gender, country of birth, race, labor-force participation, and devotional activities. For reference, I compare emerging adults to congregants ages 30 to 75.⁵

Marital Status

The majority of emerging adults in congregations have never married. However, most emerging adults have married by the time they are 26. By age 29, the never married comprise only 1 in 4 respondents. In comparison, 1 in 13 older adults have never married. A small minority (6%) of emerging adults reported “living in a committed relationship,” though this response was twice as common among mainline

Protestants and Catholics as it was among evangelicals. One explanation for the variation in prevalence of cohabiting respondents could be that evangelicals tend to marry younger than those in other traditions; hence, there would be a smaller proportion of unmarried evangelicals able to cohabit. However, the proportion of never-married emerging adults is similar across traditions, so it seems more likely that social norms related to evangelical teaching about the sinfulness of sex outside marriage inhibit churchgoing evangelicals from cohabiting or lead cohabiting former parishioners to fade from congregational life.

Gender and Children

The distribution of men and women does not vary much across religious traditions, or by emerging-adult and older-adult status within each tradition. In all categories, women make up about 6 in 10 worshippers. Until age 29, the majority of emerging adults in congregations have no children. Among emerging adults who do have children, about half have one child and half have two or more children.

Native and Foreign Born

Most emerging adults were born in the United States. Foreign-born emerging adults are most common in Catholic parishes, where they constitute 3 in 10 emerging adults. In comparison, 2 in 10 older adults in Catholic parishes are foreign born. Foreign-born emerging adults make up 3% of emerging adults in mainline Protestant and 7% of emerging adults in evangelical Protestant congregations.

Race

The racial diversity of emerging adults varies significantly between religious traditions. Almost all emerging adults in mainline churches identified themselves as white, as did over three quarters of evangelical emerging adults (see Table 2). There is no majority racial group among Catholic emerging adults. Nearly 40% of Catholic emerging adults identified as Hispanic. The pattern of overall racial diversity shown in Table 2 could be the result of aggregating emerging adults from highly segregated congregations. However, a similar pattern of racial diversity is found within congregations in each tradition. Consider as one

indicator of racial diversity the percentage of congregations in which whites make up at least 20% but less than 80% of worshippers. This threshold of racial diversity is met by 1% of mainline congregations, 9% of evangelical congregations, and 29% of Catholic parishes.

Table 2: Distribution of race and ethnicity among emerging adults (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical
White	92%	49%	78%
Black	4%	2%	11%
Hispanic	1%	38%	8%
Asian	1%	10%	2%

Respondents could choose multiple categories and additional categories not tabulated here.

Labor-Force Participation

Emerging adults are as likely as older adults to participate in the labor force. However, the USCLS question about labor-force participation did not distinguish among full-time work, part-time work, and self-employment. About two thirds of adults in both age groups reported active labor-force participation. Nearly 4 in 10 emerging adults are students.

Devotional Activities

Emerging adults were less likely to report spending daily time in devotional activities such as prayer and meditation than were older adults (33% vs. 46%).

3. How Are Emerging Adults Involved in Congregational Life?

Most emerging adults in congregations reported attending weekly. Evangelical emerging adults are the most likely to be weekly attendees. Mainline congregations have the highest percentage of emerging adults visiting for the first time among all emerging adults present in the congregation. While having a high percentage of visitors may sound positive, it is not necessarily great news for mainline congregations, because the percentage is calculated

based on a relatively small total population of emerging adults. The relatively high percentage of first-time visitors among mainline congregations is an indication that mainline congregations have a hard time retaining those emerging adults who occasionally visit.

Emerging adults are twice as likely to have participated in their congregation for less than two years compared with older adults. However, the majority of emerging adults have participated in the congregation for at least two years and a quarter of emerging adults have been attending for over a decade.

Emerging adults do not contribute as large a portion of their income to congregations as older adults do, on average. About a quarter give at least 5% of their net income, compared with about half of older adults who give this amount. A fifth of emerging adults said they do not contribute to their congregation.

Most members of both age groups reported having at least some close friends in their congregation. However, emerging adults were more likely than older adults to report little contact with others in the congregation. Among emerging adults who worship at least once a month, little contact with others in the congregation was reported by 1 in 10 evangelicals, 2 in 10 mainliners, and 3 in 10 Catholics.

4. What Do Emerging Adults Value in Congregations?

Emerging adults and older adults appreciate similar aspects of their congregation. The survey asked respondents to vote for up to three aspects of congregational life they most value. Both age groups voted sermons, communion, and traditional worship as the most valued traits of their congregation, though a larger percentage of 30- to 75-year-olds voted for each of these traits. Emerging adults are more likely to value contemporary worship, evangelism, social activities, and openness to social diversity.

Table 3: Valued aspects of congregational life by age group (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

Valued Aspects	18 to 29 year olds	30- to 75-year-olds
Sermons	34%	40%
Communion	33%	48%
Traditional worship	21%	30%
Contemporary worship	19%	16%
Reaching those who do not attend church	19%	14%
Children/youth ministry	16%	16%
Social activities or meeting new people	15%	11%
Bible study, prayer groups, and other groups	14%	13%
Openness to social diversity	14%	9%
Community care or social justice emphasis	14%	14%
Practical care for one another	10%	13%
Prayer ministry	7%	8%
Adult church-school	7%	6%
Congregation's school or preschool	6%	9%

Respondents voted for up to three aspects of congregation life they most valued.

Traditional hymns are the most popular style of worship music among both age groups. However, emerging adults expressed more interest in less traditional styles of music than did older adults. Greater proportions of emerging adults prefer praise music, other contemporary music, and African American gospel music. Older adults are more likely to prefer hymns (traditional and contemporary), sung responsorial psalms, and classical music or chorales.

Table 4: Favored styles of music by age group (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

Favored Music	18 to 29 year olds	30- to 75-year-olds
Traditional hymns	44%	61%
Praise music	41%	32%
Contemporary hymns	22%	27%
Other contemporary music	19%	12%
Music from a variety of cultures	9%	9%
Sung responsorial psalms	8%	11%
African American gospel music	7%	4%
Classical music or chorales	7%	10%
Contemplative chants like Taize	2%	2%

Respondents voted for up to two preferred music styles.

Emerging adults were more likely to report sometimes experiencing boredom during worship services than older adults. Among emerging adults, boredom was reported by roughly 4 in 10 evangelicals, half of mainliners, and 6 in 10 Catholics.

Both age groups tended to report that their spiritual needs are being met by their congregations and that church leaders encourage the respondents to find and use their gifts and skills. However, the older age group was slightly more likely to respond affirmatively to each of these measures.

5. What Are the Characteristics of Congregations with at Least 10% Emerging Adults?

In 95% of congregations in the USCLS sample (378 of 399), emerging adults are underrepresented compared with their presence in the general American population (22% of adults). While about 10% of all adults in the USCLS congregations are emerging adults, the average congregation has an even smaller percentage of emerging adults (8%).⁸ This difference between the overall percentage of emerging adults and the average percentage in congregations is due to the concentration of emerging adults in large congregations.

In the remainder of this report, I consider the characteristics of congregations with at least 10% emerging adults. Less than a third of congregations meet this threshold. Considering the characteristics of these congregations will provide clues about which factors could help attract and retain emerging adults. For most congregations, it is probably unrealistic to hope that enough emerging adults can be recruited that they will make up 22% of adults, as they do nationwide. A more realistic goal for congregations would be to have 10% of adults in the emerging category. Among the congregations in this sample, the 10% emerging-adult threshold is met by 10% of the mainline, 31% of the Catholic, and 59% of the evangelical congregations. In the following section of this report, I compare traits of congregations with less than 10% emerging adults and at least 10% emerging adults.

Table 5: Distribution of congregations in which at least 10% of adults are ages 18– 29, by religious tradition (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

	Less than 10% emerging adult	At least 10% emerging adult
Mainline	90%	10%
Catholic	69%	31%
Evangelical	41%	59%

It may seem likely that communities with large emerging adult populations produce congregations with large emerging adult populations. However, even congregations close to large emerging adult populations may struggle to involve emerging adults in congregational life. Among congregations in the survey, being in a county with a higher proportion of young adults does increase the chance that the congregation has at least 10% emerging adults. However, even in counties with high proportions of emerging adults, the majority of congregations do not meet the 10% threshold.

There are three important demographic patterns that distinguish congregations with higher percentages of emerging adults across each of the religious traditions. Emerging adults are concentrated in congregations that are larger, have proportionally more men, and are more racially diverse. Congregations that meet the 10% threshold have more adults attending worship services than the congregations that do not meet this threshold. In congregations with less than 10% emerging adults, 36 out of 100 congregants are men, while 41 out of 100 congregants are men in congregations with at least 10% emerging adults. In congregations with more emerging adults, whites are only 76% of worshippers, whereas whites are 92% of worshippers in congregations with fewer emerging adults.

Earlier we saw that emerging adults are more likely than older adults to value evangelism, social activities, and social diversity. These values fit well with the observed tendency of emerging adults to cluster in congregations that are larger, have a more even gender balance, and have more racial diversity. The survey did not ask whether respondents value the congregation as a place to find dating partners. However, we have seen that most emerging adults in congregations are unmarried, so it seems safe to assume that many would indeed like to find dating partners in a congregation. Emerging adults may assume that the chance of finding a suitable partner is higher in larger congregations, which may even

offer young adult groups. The presence of at least a few young unmarried men may be valued by both men and women.

Table 6: Demographic characteristics of congregations, by religious tradition and emerging adult composition (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

	Average Worship Attendance Estimate	
	Less than 10% emerging adult	At least 10% emerging adult
Mainline	137	151
Catholic	616	856
Evangelical	110	228
All Churches	258	381

	Percentage of Men in Congregation	
	Less than 10% emerging adult	At least 10% emerging adult
Mainline	36%	42%
Catholic	36%	39%
Evangelical	38%	41%
All Churches	36%	41%

	Percentage of White Adults in Congregation	
	Less than 10% emerging adult	At least 10% emerging adult
Mainline	96%	86%
Catholic	84%	52%
Evangelical	90%	85%
All Churches	92%	76%

Congregations with high concentrations of emerging adults tend to be more theologically conservative than other congregations. About half of respondents in congregations with a high concentration of emerging adults hold exclusivist theological views (denying that all religions are equally good paths to truth), compared to 3 in 10 who hold exclusivist views in other congregations. Likewise, in the congregations with a high concentration of emerging adults, half of congregants say that the Bible is to be taken literally, word for word. Only 3 in 10 are biblical literalists in congregations with lower concentrations of emerging adults. Within religious traditions, these percentages vary considerably, but the same pattern holds. In mainline, Catholic, and evangelical congregations, the congregations with a greater concentration of emerging adults tend to be those with members who hold more conservative beliefs.

Table 7: Theological characteristics of congregants, by congregation's religious tradition and emerging adult composition (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

Percentage of congregants who were exclusivists		
	Less than 10% emerging adult	At least 10% emerging adult
Mainline	25%	29%
Catholic	20%	22%
Evangelical	63%	72%
All Churches	31%	53%

Percentage of congregants who were Biblical literalists		
	Less than 10% emerging adult	At least 10% emerging adult
Mainline	22%	31%
Catholic	16%	24%
Evangelical	64%	68%
All Churches	29%	51%

Conclusion

Emerging adults are underrepresented in each religious tradition we have considered. They are most likely to be found in evangelical churches and least likely to be found in mainline churches. The majority of emerging adults in congregations are unmarried and do not have children. Most are women. Most were born in the United States, but a large minority of Catholics were foreign born. Catholic emerging adults come from more diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds than Protestants. While emerging adults value many of the same traits in their congregation as older adults, they place greater emphasis on nontraditional worship styles, evangelism, social activities, and diversity. Emerging adults tend to be concentrated in congregations that are larger and have more men, greater racial diversity, and members with more conservative theology.

Appendix:

Notes on the Data in This Report

All claims in this essay refer specifically to respondents in mainline Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical Protestant congregations in the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey. While there are many other surveys of congregations, most rely upon information provided by one key informant in each congregation. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey is the largest available survey

of adults worshipping in American congregations. Respondents in the sample are concentrated in relatively large congregations, as are Americans nationwide. In *Congregations in America*, Mark Chaves notes the median worship attendee participates in a congregation of 400, while the median congregation has 75 participants. In other words, the average worshipper goes to a congregation that is relatively large, while the average congregation is relatively small.

Nearly 1,300 congregations were invited to participate in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. Over 800 agreed to administer the survey, but nearly half did not return completed surveys, for various reasons. While this response rate would be considered low for a sample of individuals, it is a significant accomplishment for a burdensome census of all worshipers attending a congregation during a weekend. It is possible that the characteristics of emerging adults in the congregations that did not participate in the survey vary to some degree from participating congregations. Reported results should be considered descriptions of the general patterns expected to be observed in mainline Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical Protestant congregations nationwide rather than statistics that can be generalized with a known degree of precision.

Additional information about the U.S. Congregational Life Survey is available at www.uscongregations.org. All analysis in this report was conducted by the author.

Notes

¹ Another valuable resource on this topic is chapter 11 of Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Wuthnow analyzes information from the National Congregations Survey. In the National Congregations Survey, one key informant in each congregation provided extensive information about the congregation, including an estimate of the percentage ages 18 to 35. Wuthnow analyzes the characteristics of congregations with high and low reported estimates of young adults.

² See the appendix of Hackett (2008), *Religion and Fertility in the United States: The Influence of Affiliation, Region, and Congregation*, for notes on religious tradition coding. Note that all religious congregations were eligible to be included in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. The survey includes congregations from many traditions, including Jewish synagogues, Buddhist temples, and black Protestant churches. However, because of the limited number of congregations from each of these traditions in the sample, this analysis focuses only on the three traditions that have over 100 congregations in the sample. The subsample of congregations in this report includes 166 mainline Protestant, 128 evangelical Protestant, and 105 Catholic congregations.

³ In a prior survey with a representative sample of Americans (the 2000 General Social Survey), respondents who attended a congregation within the last year were asked to name their congregation. Nominated congregations were located and invited to participate in the Congregational Life Survey.

⁴ This statistic is calculated from information posted here: www.census.gov/popest/archives/2000s/vintage_2001/US-2001EST-ASRO-01.html. The midyear 2001 total U.S. adult population was estimated to be 212,244,726 people, and the number of adults ages 18 to 29 was estimated to be 46,757,145.

⁵ For lack of a widespread label for this population that is past the emerging adult age range, I refer to them as “older adults.” In this dataset, 80% of worshippers are in the older age range (ages 30 to 75). Adults over 75 comprise 15% of mainline Protestants but only 6% of evangelical Protestants.

⁶ It is not possible to determine whether these “committed relationships” are heterosexual or homosexual from the information collected in the survey.

⁷ Recall that the Congregational Life Survey provides information about only those attending worship services in each congregation. Some of the respondents who have participated in these congregations in the past whose spiritual needs were not being met or whose gifts and skills were not affirmed by church leaders are likely to have stopped attending regularly.

⁸ Among the adult population of congregations in this sample, emerging adults are 5% of the average mainline congregation, 8% of the average Catholic parish, and 12% of the average evangelical congregation.

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Faith Formation with Emerging Adults: Congregational Practices

John Roberto

How can churches address the distinctive spiritual and religious needs of emerging adults? What does faith formation with emerging adults look like? To answer these questions Part 1 of this article presents research findings on what young adults are seeking in a congregation and what congregations are doing to address their religious and spiritual needs. Part 2 presents a variety of congregational examples of approaches, ideas and practices in faith formation with emerging adults. The insights from research and practice provide approaches that a congregation can utilize in developing or enhancing faith formation with emerging adults.

Part 1. Insights from Research

In *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* Richard Flory and Donald Miller report on a study of churches that are engaging emerging adults (post-boomers) and the experience of young adults in these churches. They observe that these emerging adults have embedded their lives in spiritual communities in which their desire and need for both expressive/experiential activities, whether through art, music, or service-oriented activities, and for a close-knit, physical community and communion with others are met. They are seeking to develop a balance for individualism and rational asceticism through religious experience and spiritual meaning in an embodied faith. The dominant characteristic across the young adults they interviewed was a desire for a theologically grounded belief that makes sense cognitively, combined with nonrational expressive tendencies—they want a faith that makes cognitive sense to them and that is also an expressive, embodied spiritual experience. Young adult Christians are searching for a more holistic faith than what a purely cognitive and rational approach can offer. They are seeking both a deep spiritual experience and a community experience, each of which provides them with meaning in their lives, and each of which is meaningless without the other.

Flory and Miller characterize post-Boomer faith as *Expressive Communalism*—reflecting an emphasis on embodiment and community: using one's body in worship; in living out, or embodying, Christian teachings, in service; and in a desire for life in a particular faith community where they can be both personally fulfilled and serve others. They desire a theologically grounded belief that makes cognitive sense to them and that is also an expressive, embodied spiritual experience. Using their research as a guide, emerging adults seek

congregations and faith formation that:

- offer community and spirituality in the context of a clearly defined faith tradition
- offer worship and faith formation that is visual and experiential
- respond to their needs for empowerment, leadership opportunities, responsibility, and accountability, as well as authenticity and accessibility
- strengthen their distinctive Christian identity so that they know who they are and what they believe, and are able to honestly encounter religious differences, understand people of other faiths, and explore areas of mutuality
- provide opportunities for serving the surrounding community, “bringing the church to the community”
- study the Bible and Christian tradition, then apply it to life in an environment that promotes relationship building and encourages questioning
- engage them in creative uses of the history, traditions, and rituals of different Christian traditions for a more physically and visually oriented practice; and encouraging the development of ancient spiritual disciplines, such as silence and contemplation

In the study *Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation*, Tobin Belzer, Richard Flory, Nadia Roumani, and Brie Loskota report on their study of fifteen Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim congregations who are engaging young adults in congregational life. While they differ organizationally, they share numerous characteristics in terms of approach. Over the course of one year, the research team visited congregations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington, D.C., urban areas where large populations of each religious faith have strong representation. Through exploratory conversations with young adults, religious leaders, and professionals working in religious institutions in each city, the team chose congregations within each religious tradition that represent a broad theological spectrum, from conservative to progressive. Each congregation also was chosen for the intergenerational participation of its members. Based on qualitative interviews and participant

observation, the team constructed profiles of Christian (Protestant and Catholic), Jewish, and Muslim congregations. The team spent several weeks collecting data at each of fifteen congregations, ultimately conducting approximately one hundred interviews with congregational leaders, lay leaders, and young adults.

They found six common themes, across religious traditions, which captured what young adults were seeking in a congregation and what congregations were doing to address their religious and spiritual needs.

1. ***Young adults want to feel that their presence is valued.*** Those who are interested in congregational life are aware that they are exceptional—they know that the majority of young adults are not interested in religious affiliation. As such, those who participate want to be acknowledged for their unusual commitment and interest. To show that young adults’ presence is valued, congregations:
 - facilitate regular intergenerational communication between congregational members, staff, and leadership
 - regularly and frequently show appreciation for young lay leaders
 - underwrite young adult activities as a way to acknowledge the importance of young adult participation.
 - hire a specific staff person to coordinate young adult programming.
 - provide physical space within the place of worship for young adult programs.
2. ***Young adults want a sense of ownership in their congregations.*** They value opportunities to assume leadership roles within their peer group and welcome chances to move into leadership in the larger congregation. To engender a sense of ownership, congregations:
 - enable young adults to create and plan their own events
 - create leadership positions for young adults both within their peer group and within the larger congregation
 - organize committees that are lay-led by young adults

3. ***Young adults' interests in religion are multifaceted.*** For some, their deep sense of belonging comes from being a part of a community. They want to connect with others who are also articulating a sense of self. Some young adults desire emotional support and guidance. Some want their religious group to be a place where they can develop their professional and support networks. Many single young adults participate in congregations in the hope of meeting a life partner. Many young adults want to learn about increasing their practice of tradition and rituals. Some seek to deepen their relationship with God. Some approach religion through the intellectual study of modern socio-historical texts or the religious canon. Others value the opportunity to effect social change with a group of people who share their values. Still other young adults seek a space for creative religious expression through music, art, writing, or dance. To acknowledge that young adults interests in religion are multifaceted, congregations:
- offer multiple points of entry: social, educational, spiritual, cultural, emotional, and theological
 - create multiple arenas for young adults to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities
 - organize affinity groups so that the young adults can find like-minded peers
 - offer opportunities where young adults can sometimes engage as participants, and other times take on the responsibilities of leading
4. ***Young adults thrive when they are "met where they are."*** Young adults do not want to be judged for their level of religious practice or knowledge, nor feel ashamed by their lack of knowledge or practice. They want to approach religious practice focused on meaning and intention. While respecting the religious standards of the congregation and their religion at large, many took pride in making their own choices based on personal factors such as level of knowledge, peer group, and religious upbringing. To meet young adults where they are, congregations:

- offer learning opportunities directed specifically to young adults
 - explore and explain the congregation's (denomination's) theological framework through a learning process that is open to questioning
 - reduce fee structure so that participation is financially viable
5. ***Young adults welcome opportunities to feel emotionally affected.*** Young adults want to feel moved by music, a connection to their history, a sense of cultural heritage, and nostalgia. They want to be emotionally engaged and feel like a participant, not an audience member, at worship services. To produce an affective, or emotional, experience:
- religious leaders cultivate an atmosphere during worship services that enables young adults to be participants instead of audience members
 - leadership that is accessible and charismatic
 - congregation funds a charismatic and young staff person who can cultivate a community of young adults
6. ***Young adults respond to a theoretical and practical balance between the particular and the universal.*** Every individual interviewed acknowledged that there are many ways to believe in God and to live a religious life. Young adults appreciate an acknowledgement of the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. They do not want to feel cloistered from the outside world. Instead, they want to be able to share their spiritual interests with peers of different faiths. Through the articulation of similarities and differences, they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith. To create balance between the particular and the universal, congregations:
- focus on the thoughtful transmission of the theology and tradition of the particular congregation, not on theological debates (especially those that disparage other religious traditions or denominations).

- create an atmosphere that is self-consciously open and analytical: acknowledging the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation
- facilitate interfaith and interdenominational exchange

The research team also found that young adults “exercised typical American individualism as they decided about associating with religious communities, sometimes participating in more than one simultaneously” (Belzer, et al., 106). The research team identified the following factors influencing young adult’s participation in a faith community:

- choosing a specific community, rather than committing to a larger denomination
- making choices based on a number of factors, such as interpersonal relationships, worship style, geographic location, opportunities for involvement, and accessibility of leadership
- deciding how often to attend and the extent of their participation
- choosing how much of the official teachings to accept and how much ritual observance to practice
- balancing their individual authority with their identity as members of a community and religious tradition
- seeking a community where there is both flexibility and structure
- being experientially engaged as opposed to a “show up and watch” style of religious participation
- building interpersonal relationships with people who express and explore their religious identities in similar ways; relationship building was a fundamental aspect of young adults’ congregational experience (Belzer, et al., 106-107)

In *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them* Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, report on the findings from three LifeWay Research projects, including a large scale survey of young adults and a survey of 149 churches that were reaching an extraordinary number of young adults. Based on the responses of young adults in the research studies, the research

team identified four markers of young adult ministry:

1. **Community** is vital to the emerging generations. For them, life is meant to be experienced together, and they sense a need to be involved in genuine relationships with others. They are looking for friends they can call for help when their tire is flat and people who will call and celebrate when they get a promotion. They want to walk through life with their friends. They have a need for people, and they show a deep desire for relational equity. In other words, they long to be deeply invested in others and have others deeply invested in them. They desire to be a major part of each other’s lives—the day-to-day, big and small “stuff of life.” They also think that others should be a part of the most important aspect of their lives—their spiritual journey.
2. **Depth** is important. Young adults want to be people of significance. Deep significance. They care about who they are and what they’re becoming—“ankle deep” doesn’t work for them. They told us that they’d rather be “in over their heads” in life as opposed to kicking around in the shallow end. Young adults also have interest in addressing the hard-to-talk about topics. They appreciate tough questions and despise pat answers. Their responses indicate that they like wrestling with difficult things and chewing on challenging ideas. They express a high degree of interest in processing information, and they often find the questions more important than the answers.
3. **Responsibility** is strongly valued because young adults know their choices make a difference. Decisions are everywhere. Recycle. Buy or trade fair. Sponsor a child. Respect your elders. Tithe. Love your neighbors. Respond to the crisis in Darfur. These are the type of opportunities that define this generation. They affirmed the importance of these issues, and they are committed to doing the “right” thing even as they grow in their understanding of what right means. They’ve concluded that all of

these decisions matter, and what matters most is how they respond.

4. **Connection** is the fourth area of importance. This could be called mentoring or intergenerational ministry. They want to learn from those who have already experienced the things they are about to face. They're looking for a connection with people who will walk alongside them and advise them. They want a connection that gives them the opportunity to have someone pour their lives into them and teach them along their journey. And interestingly enough, they're willing to do that for someone else too. (Stetzer, et al., 67-68)

These four markers of ministry, point to implications for developing faith formation and ministry with emerging adults. The young adults in the study, both churched and unchurched, expressed the following needs and interests:

- to interact with members of a group multiple times per week
- to participate in small group activities that promote relationships and belonging
- to connect with a mentor; to receive information and advice from individuals with experience
- to participate in Bible study that minimizes pat answers in the exploration of Scripture
- to participate in small group meetings to discuss life application of Scripture
- to determine their own beliefs through hands-on, practical learning experiences
- to utilize their talents and abilities through opportunities to meet needs
- to participate in hands-on outreach activities on a frequent basis that meet the needs of others
- to benefit others through global service projects

Based on their research with 149 churches that were reaching an extraordinary number of young adults, the research team found nine common characteristics in churches that are reaching young adults.

1. **Creating Deeper Community.** Churches that are effective at attracting and

developing young adults place a high value on moving people into a healthy small group system. Young adults are trying to connect and will make a lasting connection wherever they can find belonging.

2. **Making a Difference through Service.** Churches that are transforming young adults value leading people to serve through volunteerism. More than being pampered, young adults want to be part of something bigger than themselves and are looking to be part of an organization where they can make a difference through acts of service.
3. **Experiencing Worship.** Churches that are engaging young adults are providing worship environments that reflect their culture while also revering and revealing God. More than looking for a good performance, young adults desire to connect with a vertical experience of worship.
4. **Conversing the Content.** Churches that are led by authentic communicators are drawing young adults in the message. Though their styles vary from topic to exegetical, authentic communicators are true to their own personal style of communication and are usually more conversational than preachy.
5. **Leveraging Technology.** Churches that are reaching young adults are willing to communicate in a language of technology familiar to young adults. Young adults sense that these churches are welcoming churches that value and understand them, engaging them where they are.
6. **Building Cross-Generational Relationships.** Churches that are linking young adults with older, mature adults are challenging young adults to move on to maturity through friendship, wisdom, and support. Young adults are drawn to churches that believe in them enough to challenge them.
7. **Moving Toward Authenticity.** Churches that are engaging young adults are reaching them not only by their excellence but by their honesty. Young adults are looking for

and connecting to churches where they see leaders that are authentic, transparent, and on a learning journey.

8. **Leading by Transparency.** Churches that are influencing young adults highly value an incarnational approach to ministry and leadership. This incarnational approach doesn't require revealing one's personal sin list so much as it does require that those in leadership must be willing to express a personal sense of humanity and vulnerability.
9. **Leading by Team.** Increasingly churches reaching young adults seem to be taking a team approach to ministry. They see ministry not as a solo venture but as a team sport—and the broader participation it creates increases the impact of the ministry. (Stetzer, et al., 143-44)

Young adults are longing for community and fellowship with peers, looking for ways to reach people in need, and circling the church but not always finding a home in it. Connection is the key. Community with other young adults is extremely important in their lives. Young adults seek authentic answers in the Bible and Christian tradition, best learned through participation in small group meetings. Making a difference is essential by having the opportunity to meet the needs of others on a regular basis. Social action is cited as the major reason uninvolved young adults would consider being part of a church.

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Part 2. Examples from Congregations

Part 2 presents a variety of congregational examples of faith formation with emerging adults. They are not presented as the best way to do faith formation with emerging adults, but rather as examples to help your church in developing or enhancing faith formation with emerging adults. You will see in these examples many of the key insights from the research studies in actual practice, such as the emphasis on community, small groups, engaging worship, service and mission, and substantive faith formation offerings. (For a review of additional practices and strategies for young adult faith formation consult the article, "Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation" in the Fall/Winter 2007 issue of *Lifelong Faith*. The article is online at: www.lifelongfaith.com/articles.htm.)

The following descriptions were developed from a review of recommended churches that are engaging young adults in faith formation and church life. Descriptions are drawn from each congregation's website. For more information use the provided website links. (Churches are listed alphabetically.)

■ 20something

North Coast Church, Vista, CA

(www.northcoastchurch.com)

(<http://northcoast20something.com>)

20something is a ministry of North Coast Church for single adults, ages 20 to 30, who seek to know God more through fellowship, study, and outreach. There are retreats, seasonal parties, and periodic outreach events to get out in the community and serve. There are regular activities from game nights to hikes and beach volleyball during the summer.

- **Growth Groups.** The center of the *20something* ministry are Growth Groups that meet weekly to cultivate deeper relationship with God and each other through sermon/book studies and prayer. Growth Groups meet weekly for quarter long sessions at the North Coast Church campus and in people's homes around North County. Most groups are co-ed and sermon-based,

but there are also groups just for women and men that focus on various topics. Most of the studies are based on the previous weekend's message. These "sermon-based" Growth Groups are built on a "Lecture-Lab" model. Imagine the weekend message as a lecture on Christian living, and the Growth Group as a lab where you get people discuss how the weekend's message works in real life. Each week there will be a series of Bible passages and questions on the back of the sermon note sheet to study before the meeting. It will usually take 20 to 40 minutes per week to complete the homework. (For an example see: www.northcoastchurch.com/index.php?id=140)

- **Sunday Night.** *zosomething* meets every Sunday night at 7:30 in the Canvas, North's Coast Church's coffee house on the Melrose Campus. It's a time to meet other *zosomething* people and hear about upcoming events. Most *zosomething* people attend North Coast Church's weekend service called "Last Call" at 6:00 pm in the Edge before heading over to *zosomething*.

■ **Kairos and Young Adult Ministry**
Brentwood Baptist Church, Nashville, TN
 (www.brentwoodbaptist.com/kairos)

- **Kairos** is a come-as-you-are Tuesday night worship experience geared toward energetic young adults who share a passion for growing together in the Word of God. Kairos is designed to challenge young adults on both a personal and spiritual level and teach them how to uniquely apply the scriptures to their life. Kairos provides a relaxed atmosphere to make new friends and enjoy the live music as young adults connect with a loving God who has a plan and purpose for your life.
- **Kairos Podcasts** contain the audio programs of the Kairos message each week.
- **Kairos Roots** is a deeper experience, using the same Kairos setup—complete with tables, chairs, and candles—there will be a time of worship and a message with a small group table discussion regarding the topic of the night as a part of the worship experience.

- **Intersect** groups provide opportunity for young adults to socialize, learn, and grow together with like-minded people in an authentic community that seeks to find and follow Christ. New groups start several times during the year on a wide variety of young adult relevant topics, for example: *Breathing New Life into Your Career*; *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day* (book study); *Life in the Journey Living Beyond Yourself*; *Me, Myself, and Lies*; *New to Fitness*; *Steps in Soul*; *TrueFaced*; *Unfamiliar Christianity*; *Unleashing Courageous Faith*; and *Your Bible Isn't Scary*.
- **Impact** is service to the local and global community with a variety of projects including providing beds for orphans and abandoned children in Haiti, Uganda, and Moldova; working at the Nashville Rescue Mission; and providing meals and supplies for the homeless.

Read more about Kairos in the book by pastor Mike Glenn: *In Real Time—Authentic Young Adult Ministry as it Happens* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009)

■ **Church of the Apostles**
Seattle, WA
 (www.apostleschurch.org)

Church of the Apostles is a young, emerging, Episcopal and Lutheran mission congregation—a future church with an ancient faith. The church's purpose is to *helpgodchangeeverything*, by participating in God's future, within today's culture and their local zip code, living and serving in intentional, sacramental community in the way of Jesus Christ.

- **Home Groups.** At Apostles, common life in Christ starts at home and among friends. God meets us where we live and wherever two or three come together in God's name to share in Christian community. The point is not just "going to a church," but being church in our daily lives and everyday interactions with others. Home groups gather in actual houses, but also in other kinds of spaces. Some groups meet in coffeehouses, others in pubs and some in

parks or at the beach. The spaces vary, but the purpose is the same: small cells of people (followers and seekers) gathering weekly or every other week to share life, tell stories, eat meals, pray, serve and grow together in Jesus Christ. Each group has its own vibe, way of gathering and basic path. Some groups are on a cognitive path (studying the Bible and deepening knowledge), some are on an expressive path (making music, creating art or writing poetry) some are on a communitarian path around a lifestyle or common interest (young moms, hikers, AA recovery). Some are on a contemplative path (gathering for evening prayers or spiritual exercises), while others are on an active path (working soup kitchens, tutoring kids, building houses). Although they may take up different activities, each group is an expression of church and will therefore take time to worship, pray, reflect on scripture and engage in a group ministry in the world.

- **Service.** Doing justice and showing mercy is core to the DNA of Christian life. What distinguished the early Christians from the surrounding society (and fueled the growth of the church) was just and merciful living, steeped in love for Jesus Christ. People took notice of how Christians cared for “orphans and widows in their distress” and kept themselves from being jaded by the ways of the world. This same love of justice and kindness is Christian spiritual formation of the highest order. We are called to actively serve poor, oppressed, hungry, sick and needy people, not to earn brownie points with God (not possible), but to live into and share with others the justice and mercy that God continues to rain upon the world in Christ. As we practice the justice and mercy we have already received from God, like water over rocks. God is slowly transforming us into just and merciful people. Apostles Mission Dei Group coordinates a different local service project each month, as well as coordinating out of state or country projects once or twice per year, so consider getting involved in one of these, as you are led by the Spirit, to share in the Missio Dei (mission of God).

- **Sunday Mass.** Smaller groups of apostles that meet at various times during the week for community groups, prayer, scripture reflection and service, come together each week for Mass. At Mass we immerse ourselves in the ways of God, and discern what God is doing in us and in our world, as we attend to God’s Word (Jesus Christ whose story is told in bible readings and a message), the world (prayer and offering) and share the bread and wine of communion at Table. All this, so we can go home (sending forth to mission). Apostles’ worship is neither “traditional” nor “contemporary” but ancient-future. Ancient-future liturgy speaks across generations and draws equally upon ancient (hymns, chant, candles, communion) and techno-modern (alt. rock, art, ambient, projection, video) sources, so there is no need to ‘check your culture at the door.’ so, come as you are, wear your jeans, show your body art, tote your java, and be at home spiritually, with God, and among friends.
- **Events.** A variety of other activities include a Supper Club, a Theology Pub every other Tuesday night, Soul Café, and Film Nights.

■ **Contemporary Roman Catholics (CRC)
Holy Trinity Church, New York City**
(www.crcnyc.org)

The Holy Trinity Contemporary Roman Catholics (CRC) is a dynamic group of young adults dedicated to providing social interaction, community service, and spiritual growth. CRC offers many ways to get involved. It’s an opportunity for young adults to meet like-minded Catholic young adults, to help those less fortunate through community service programs, and to enrich their spiritual journey, no matter where they are along the way. CRC offers community forums, spiritual groups, and retreats to help deepen faith.

- **Weekly Mass and Gathering.** Each week following the 5:30 Mass at Holy Trinity, the CRC group goes out to an area bar or restaurant to socialize.
- **New Members Only Group Dinner.** Regular dinners that make it easy for young

adults to come out in a casual setting with other new members to network, socialize, and learn more about CRC.

- **CRC Book Club.** A gathering at a CRC member's home to discuss a book, with light dinner and drinks served.
- **Events.** Events include Broadway shows and plays, visits to art museums, "Taste of the Upper West Side" food festival, and the CRC Spiritual and Recreational Camping Retreat.

■ The Crossing

St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, Boston, MA
(www.thecrossingboston.org)

The Crossing is a community that seeks to walk in the life-changing, world-changing Way of Jesus, sharing the love, hope, beauty and justice of God in the city of Boston. Everybody is welcome to join as we gather for transformative worship, spiritual practice, and authentic community; as we fuse the wisdom and mystery of ancient traditions with that of urban mystics, artists and activists; and as we move out to join God in healing, freeing and blessing all people, communities and the earth.

- **Worship.** Every Thursday from 6-7:30 pm at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, be ready for a transformative encounter with God that makes you act a bit different in the world. Here's what we share: 1) R&B grooves laid out under monastic chant, gospel, spirituals and Episcopal hymns, 2) silence and intentional spiritual practice as part of worship, 3) reflections on the gospel, usually led by a lay person, plus some brief talk-back time, 4) open space to catch your breath and let God's word sink in, 5) Eucharist (or communion) with a groove, where everybody is welcome to celebrate the mystery of Jesus alive among us, 6) post-worship: crank the stereo and share snacks and community, 7) post-post worship: usually a field trip to a local restaurant for very cheap food or a potluck with community formation.

• **Small Groups and Formation.**

Sundays @ The Crossing

- Every Sunday @ 3-4:30 pm: An Intro to the Episcopal Church
- 1st Sundays, 5-7:30: Artist Expressions
- 2nd Sundays, 5-7:30: Bible Study
- 3rd Sundays, 5-7:30: Crossing Community Dinners
- 4th Sundays, 5-7:30: Bible Study

During the Week

- Monday-Wednesday Evenings: Neighborhood Action/Reflection Groups (justice and service action/reflection), and Covenant Groups (small discipleship circles centered around prayer and stories, 4-6 people per group)
- Thursdays after Worship: Dancing with Jesus (monthly) and Everybody Does Theology (monthly)

- **Rule of Life.** The Crossing is a community of sisters and brothers offering a compassionate, progressive, creative, generous, radically welcoming expression of God's life and love in the city of Boston. From that community has grown this Rule of Life, which like the Rule of a monastic community spells out our commitment to discipleship. We believe we are called to follow in the footsteps of the ancients and live the way of Jesus: nurturing God's Spirit in and among us; gathering everybody for prayer and celebration at God's table; bearing the good news of hope and resurrection into the world; and spreading God's mission of healing and transformation. But we know we cannot live this dream alone. We need each other. We need authentic, concrete spiritual practices that form our lives in the shape of Jesus' life. We need to make real commitments to God and to each other as we journey together closer to the heart of God and to the deepest callings on our own lives. This Rule for Real Life describes a way of walking together, and following Jesus together and making something extraordinary, holy and whole of our daily, ordinary (seemingly) individual lives. (See: www.thecrossingboston.org/Rule_of_Life.pdf)

- **Justice and Service.**
 - The Hope in Action Campaign: a young adult justice effort led by Relational Evangelists at eight ministries throughout the Boston area to develop programs of public service and social justice based on the needs and interests of the community.
 - Monday Lunch Program at the Cathedral
 - Boston Faith and Justice Network: build awareness, relationships and action around fair trade and justice issues, locally and globally
 - St. Francis House: prepare and serve meals everyday
 - Haley House: soup kitchen, food pantry and clothing room, bakery café and corner shop, youth culinary classes, noonday farm
 - Ecclesia Ministries: social services to homeless people in concert with spiritual companionship and community

■ **Generation Axis**
Willow Creek Community Church
South Barrington, IL
 (www.generationaxis.com)

- **Missional Community Hubs** are the epicenter of Willow Creek Church’s ministry with emerging adults. These are community-based out of someone’s house, apartment, or condo throughout the Chicago-land area. They exist to bring redemptive change to their neighborhoods through gatherings, serving initiatives, social events, and discipleship opportunities. This is where life happens in Axis and their dream is see Missional Community Hubs launched all over our city.
- **Life Transformation Groups** are seasonal, gender-based groups of 3-4 people that seek to live out the teachings of Jesus in intimate community with focuses on Scripture, prayer, and accountability. These communities are generally born out of relationships within an Missional Community Hub.
- The **Axis Experience** is the place where the entire Axis community gathers for prayer,

worship, and to celebrate what has happened in their Missional Community Hubs. This provides the opportunity to connect with each other around our shared language, vision, and values.

- **Generation Axis Videos** on Vimeo: stories, devotions, Bible study, promotion. (<http://vimeo.com/channels/generationsaxistv>)

■ **Marble Connection**
Marble Collegiate Church, New York City
 (www.marblechurch.org/Programs/20sand30s/tabid/100/Default.aspx)

Led by the spirit of Jesus, **Connection** is a faith-guided family of young adults who pursues the highest levels of love, compassion, and service through engagement with the world and one another. To live in the Way of Jesus, we do five things: worship, pray, be in relationship with others, learn, and serve.

- **Sundays: Worship & Fellowship** (11 am – 1:30 pm). Sunday morning is the touchstone. Sunday morning worship is followed by an hour of spiritual conversation and fellowship. In the Sunday Conversations young adults to get to know each other and share their faith and what matters in their lives, over a light brunch.
- **Prayer:** People are invited to go deeper into communion with God through prayer—whether they have an active prayer life or have never once prayed. Many Marble Connection members are prayer partners; people pray for one another.
- **Relationships:** Through a variety of fun activities and nights out on the town (New York City), young adults can meet new people and deepen friendships.
- **Learning:** Marble Connection has several different ways for young adults to feed their minds: Bible study, small groups, or the Marble Curriculum (an adult education program). Young Adult Bible Study takes place on Wednesday nights after Wednesday worship.
- **Service:** Connection members volunteer together but much of their service is

performed in everyday life. Spring mission trips allow people to take an active role in give to the local community.

■ **Newsong Third Culture Community Irvine, CA**

(www.newsong.net)

(<http://irvine.newsong.net/ministries/lifestage/youngadults>)

Newsong's Young Adult Ministry exists to transform the world by empowering young adults in their 20's-30's to be radical in their love for God and for people. There are four main elements of young adult ministry:

- **Young Adult Small Groups.** Small Groups meet once a week and live out the 3rd culture values of loving, learning and serving (through Bible studies, cultivating relationships, serving the community together). The groups consist of 7-20 people depending on which group you decide to commit to.
- **Momentum Nights.** Momentum is an event that happens once a month where people connect meaningfully with one another and with God and take steps forward in living out their faith in community. This takes a variety of forms. Some nights this has meant a speaker who delves into a topic relevant to young adults and on other nights this translates into inviting local musicians to come share their art in a café type setting.
- **Travel with a Purpose.** Travel to local and global destinations to experience culture, learn, serve and live in community for a week. These *Travel with a Purpose* trips take place twice a year for young adults to use their vacation time in a unique way.
- **Service.** Each person is carefully created with unique experiences, pains, gifting, and calling. At Newsong there are many ways to love, learn, and serve. To help people make a difference a FLOW Consult can help people recognize God's unique shaping and calling on their life. FLOW helps people find the passion that God has placed in your heart and bring it to life. Discovery is important but each person's journey is different. There

isn't a program or process that fits everyone and that is why it is important for a FLOW consultant to serve as a sounding board to provide a fresh perspective as people tell their stories. They identify obstacles in a person's path and resources to encourage growth.

In addition to these four elements there are also:

- **Message Study Guides** (and audio and video podcasts) provide a way for people dig deeper into the weekly message from worship gatherings. Each study incorporates questions that will help you examine Bible text, apply scripture to daily life, and put your faith into action. These studies can be used for small groups or individuals.
- **Connections Dinner** is a non-threatening and fun way to learn about Newsong and to meet several members of the pastoral staff. This introduction to Newsong provides an opportunity to meet new members and share the genesis of the Newsong church community and its vision and how people can participate in the life of Newsong.
- **Foundations—Beginning the Journey** is a six week class that explores the basics of what it means to be a Christ follower. **Foundations—The Bible** helps people discover what the Bible is all about and learn tools to dig into the Bible for themselves.
- **Justice N.O.W.** is a Night of Worship and music dedicated to bringing light to global issues of injustice that need immediate attention. By catching God's heart for justice through meeting God in passionate worship, people the call to a life of justice

■ **St. Lydia's Dinner Church, New York City** (www.stlydias.org)

If there's one thing that ties the folks at St. Lydia's together, it's the type of church experience that allows young adults to explore spiritual practice and theology in a deep and rich way while embracing the ambiguity, doubt, and questions that are a part of our spiritual lives.

St. Lydia's looks and feels different from most churches. St. Lydia's is a Dinner Church! People

gather each week to cook a big, delicious meal together. Worship occurs around that meal—people eat together, read scripture, pray and sing around the table. They do this because this is what worship looked like in the earliest days of the church. They believe that Communion is made around a table where people share food and themselves. St. Lydia's is a new experiment in what the Church might be when the meal we share is at the very center of our life together.

■ **St. Vincent de Paul Church**
San Francisco, CA
(www.svdpsf.org/youngadults)

The Young Adult Group at St. Vincent's is a community of young adults in their 20's and 30's who value socializing, volunteering and exploring questions of their faith with others who share a similar Catholic heritage and value system. Their mission is to promote a spiritual, social, and service oriented community for Catholics in their 20s and 30s. The core events of our group take place on the second and fourth Monday nights of each month. Many young adults also gather for Mass on Sunday at 5:15 pm and social and service activities take place on a weekly basis.

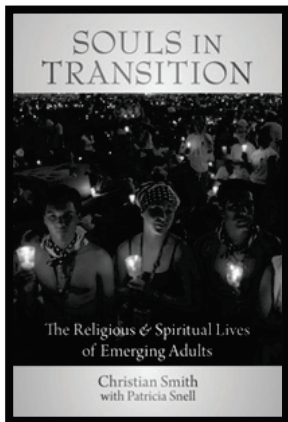
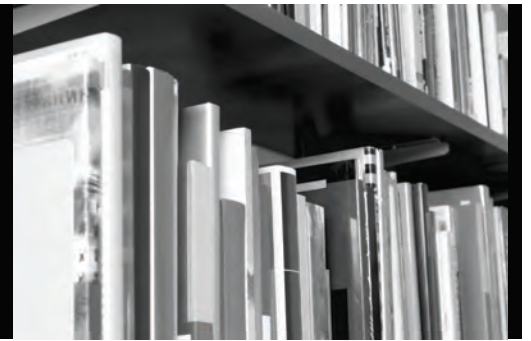
- **Monday events** are the foundation of the young adult community, meeting every second and fourth Monday to explore faith and values in a fun relaxed atmosphere, get details on upcoming social and community service activities, and make a few new friends. Whether young adults are rejoining the church after a long absence, want to learn more about Catholicism, or just meet other Catholics who value their faith and heritage, the Monday events are for them. Every meeting features a new topic and speaker. Generally, most of our topics center around questions and issues facing young adult Catholics in the world today.
- **Service** projects include regular commitments to a retirement community, delivery of food to the homeless, cooking at the soup kitchen, as well as special projects in the community.
- **Annual Retreat** provides an opportunity for reflection, spiritual renewal, fellowship, and

more. Desired outcomes for the retreat include: taking an inventory of one's life, exploring one's passions purpose in life, discerning what God is calling one to do, gaining insight and encouragement from others' experiences, increasing alignment between one's values and actions, and building relationships with other young adults.

- **Small Faith Groups** bring together young adult Catholics to deepen their faith and love of God while fostering fellowship and deepening the ties with the St. Vincent De Paul community. The format involves reflecting on the Sunday's gospel reading with questions to guide people in delving deeper into the scripture and applying it to their lives. Typically, groups decide to meet every three weeks on Sunday evening after our 5:15 pm Mass. The meetings take place at one of the groups member's houses in what often will end up being a pot-luck dinner format. The facilitator or small faith community leader is generally rotated. Groups form after the Annual Retreat, and tend to last a minimum of six months and often times longer.

Resources

Emerging Adulthood & Faith Formation



Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults

Christian Smith with Patricia Snell (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2009) [\$24.95]

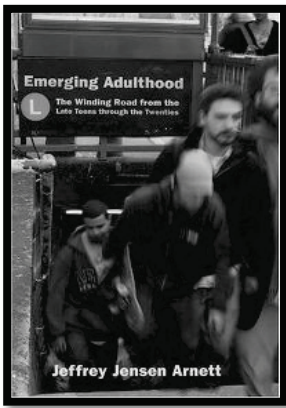
How important is religion for young people in America today? What are the major influences on their developing spiritual lives? How do their religious beliefs and practices change as young people enter into adulthood? Christian Smith's *Souls in Transition* explores these questions and many others as it tells the definitive story of the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults, ages 18 to 23, in the U.S. today. This is the follow-up study to the landmark book, *Soul Searching*. Based on interviews with thousands of young people tracked over a five-year period, *Souls in Transition* reveals how the religious practices of the teenagers portrayed in *Soul Searching* have been strengthened, challenged, and often changed as they have moved into adulthood. The book describes the broader cultural world of today's emerging adults, how that culture shapes their religious outlooks, and what the consequences are for religious faith and practice in America more generally. Some of Smith's findings are surprising. Parents turn out to be the single most important influence on the religious outcomes in the lives of young adults. On the other hand, teenage participation in evangelization missions and youth groups does not predict a high level of religiosity just a few years later. The common wisdom that religiosity declines sharply during the young adult years is shown to be greatly exaggerated. Painstakingly researched and filled with remarkable findings, *Souls in Transition* will be essential reading for everyone who wishes to know how religious practice is affected by the transition into adulthood in America today.



Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them

Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, Jason Hayes (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009) [\$17.99]

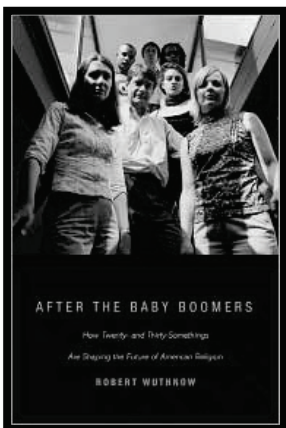
In *Lost and Found* the research team analyzes three Lifeway Research studies to identify four types of unchurched young adults in their 20s and four key markers of young adult ministry: community, depth of content, social responsibility, and cross-generational connections. *Lost and Found* also researches 149 churches that are reaching extraordinary numbers of young adults by paying close attention to the four key markers identified in the research. The stories and insights from these churches will provide direction for churches to develop faith formation that develops authentic faith in Christ among emerging adults.



Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) [\$21.95]

Recently the lives of people from age 18 to 29 have changed so dramatically that a new stage of life has developed, emerging adulthood, that is distinct from both the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood that comes in its wake. Rather than marrying and becoming parents in their early twenties, most people in industrialized societies now postpone these transitions until at least their late twenties, and instead spend the time in self-focused exploration as they try out different possibilities in their careers and relationships. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett identifies and labels, for the first time, this period of exploration, instability, possibility, self-focus, and a sustained sense of being in limbo. Marrying later and exploring more casual sexual relationships have created different hopes and fears concerning long-term commitments and the differences between love and sex. In contrast to previous portrayals of emerging adults, Arnett's research shows that they are particularly skilled at maintaining contradictory emotions—they are confident while still being wary, and optimistic in the face of large degrees of uncertainty.



After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion

Robert Wuthnow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) [\$29.95]

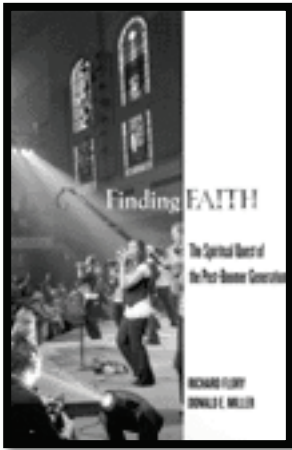
Robert Wuthnow has produced an essential and important resource for understanding the lifestyles and beliefs of young adults and the impact they are having on religion. Wuthnow interprets new evidence from scores of in-depth interviews and surveys to answer the questions: What are their churchgoing habits and spiritual interests and needs? How does their faith affect their families, their communities, and their politics? Wuthnow devotes chapters to examining seven key trends in the world of young adults, who participates in congregations, recent trends in religious beliefs, spirituality and spiritual practices, faith and family, religion and public life, ethnic diversity, religious uses of the internet, and vital congregations. This book is filled with information, analysis, and implications that can shape the church's ministry with young adults for years to come.



Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims

Edited by James Heft, S.M. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) [\$22]

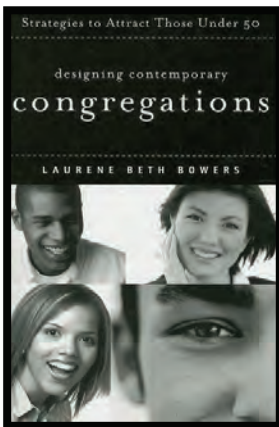
Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims is an important new book that is the result of a 2004 international conference at USC, "Faith, Fear and Indifference: Constructing the Religious Identity of the Next Generation." The book includes original essays by international scholars that explore the challenges of passing on faith today, summary reports on three recent national studies of youth and young adults, and direction for passing on faith to the next generations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The report on new research on young adults conducted at USC, "Congregations that Get It," is especially helpful.



Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation

Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008) [\$19.95]

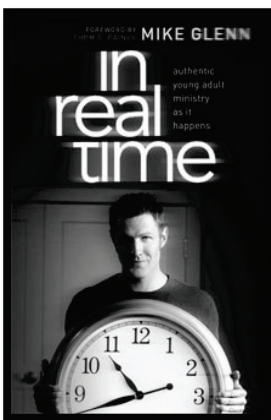
Sociologists Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller argue that we are on the verge of another potential revolution in how Christians worship and associate with one another. Just as the formative experiences of Baby Boomers were colored by such things as the war in Vietnam, the 1960s, and a dramatic increase in their opportunities for individual expression, so Post-Boomers have grown up in less structured households with working (often divorced) parents. These childhood experiences leave them craving authentic spiritual experience, rather than entertainment, and also cause them to question institutions. Flory and Miller develop a typology that captures four current approaches to the Christian faith and argue that this generation represents a new religious orientation of “expressive communalism,” in which they seek spiritual experience and fulfillment in community and through various expressive forms of spirituality.



Designing Contemporary Congregations: Strategies to Attract Those Under 50

Laune Beth Bowers (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008) [\$14]

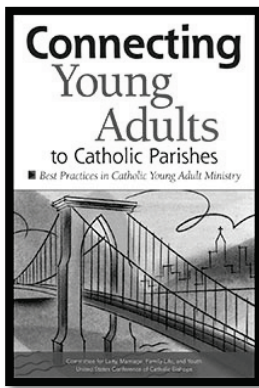
One of the reasons the traditional church is still struggling to attract the postmodern generation is because it also needs to be a contemporary congregation—in touch with culture and its current trends. Laune Beth Bowers identifies strategies to contemporize worship, fellowship, evangelism, social justice, rituals, and equipping the disciples for ministry. She says that designing healthy contemporary congregations can be achieved in three ways: 1) blending traditional with contemporary trends; 2) producing “karmic balance,” as defined by Jesus (“the measure you give will be the measure you get”); and 3) allowing culture to influence organized religion in order to strengthen the connection between the two and to make them mutually receptive to the influence of the other.



In Real Time: Authentic Young Adult Ministry as It Happens

Mike Glenn (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009) [\$12.99]

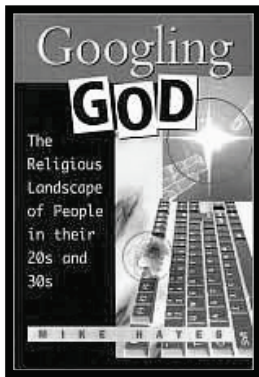
As the need for relevant young adult ministry programs increases, the best example of a successful one in action today is Kairos, a weekly worship gathering of more than one thousand young single and married people in Nashville. In *Real Time* tells the story of how this ministry unfolded, and its overriding message is one that churches everywhere can take to heart and apply. Mike Glenn is the senior pastor of Brentwood Baptist Church where he also leads Kairos. “Young adults are serious about life. They want basic and straight,” writes Glenn. “In the church, we have thought people were bored with the basic message, but in fact, they have never heard the gospel at all.”



Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes

Committee for Laity, USCCB (Washington: USCCB Publishing, 2010) [\$24.95]

Create a young adult friendly parish using the wisdom, insight, and examples from the authors in this unique book. This resource highlights how to do ministry with the young adults who are already present in the life of your parish. This text builds on the vision of the Catholic bishops' pastoral statement *Sons and Daughters of the Light* to motivate parish leaders to draw young adults into the life of the community and receive the gifts that they bring. Chapters cover a wide range of topics in young adult ministry: prayer and spirituality, catechesis, discernment and vocation, community life, pastoral care, evangelization, liturgy, justice and service, families, Hispanic/Latino perspectives, and forming faith communities.



Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s

Mike Hayes (New York: Paulist Press, 2007) [\$17.95]

Mike Hayes, the managing editor of BustedHalo.com and associate director of Paulist Young Adult Ministries, explores ministry with Millennials by examining who are young adults, what is working well in young adult ministry, and practical strategies for addressing the needs of young adults

Emerging Adulthood Research – Online Sources

- American Millennials: Generations Apart—Religion.* Marist College Institute for Public Opinion and the Knights of Columbus.
- www.kofc.org/un/cmfr/resources/Communications/documents/poll_mil_religion.pdf
- Between Two Worlds: How Young Latinos Come of Age in America.* Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next. Pew Hispanic Center
- <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1438/young-latinos-coming-of-age-in-america>
- Changing SEA: The Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults.* Includes 15 essays on topics related to the lives of emerging adults, written by scholars, and an ethnographic investigation that explores: What kinds of churches do emerging adults attend? Why do they go? How involved are they? How do churches engage emerging adults in meaningful ways?
- www.changingsea.org
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