

NOT YOUNG ADULTS BUT EMERGING ADULTS



What is a 'young adult'?

This is the question that plagues many people in young adult ministry in the United States. Young adults are often described by their age range: 18 to 30 years old. But Christian Smith, author of *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, suggests the term *young adult* is a misnomer. He proposes we call this age group *emerging adults*. 'Rather than viewing these years as simply the last hurrah of adolescence or an early stage of real adulthood, (this title) recognizes the very unique characteristics of this new and particular phase of life.'

Previously, he and Melissa Lundquist Denton wrote a book called *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Published in 2005. *Soul Searching* became one of the most influential books in American Catholic Youth Ministry since the USCCB published *Renewing the Vision* in 1997.

Soul Searching studied the religiosity of American teenagers. *Souls in Transition* continues that study by looking at the lives of 18 to 24 year olds. 'The features marking this stage are intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, feeling in limbo or in transition or in-between, and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope.'

Characteristics

One of the reasons the Church has a tough time reaching out to an emerging adult population is that, from a cultural standpoint, it is a relatively new thing. Smith cites four factors that have created the world of 'emerging adults.'

1. **The dramatic growth of higher education.** 'A huge proportion of American youth are no longer stopping school and beginning stable careers at 18 but extend their formal schooling into their twenties. And (others) are continuing in graduate and professional school programs often up until their thirties.'
2. **The delay of marriage.** Comparing surveys from the 1950s, the average age of marriage has moved almost six years later. People used to be married on average in their early twenties. Now they are getting married in their late twenties. 'Half a century ago, many young people were anxious to get out of high school, marry, settle down, have children, and start a long term career. But many youth today face almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage.'
3. **The lack of life-long careers.** The ever-changing economy has replaced long-term careers with jobs that have lower security and often result in emerging adults bouncing from job to job until they establish a career. 'Far from being happy to graduate and take the factory job their father or uncle arranged for them—a job that actually does not likely exist anymore—many youth today spend 5 to 10 years experimenting with different job and career options before finally deciding on a long-term career direction.'
4. **Parental support.** Because of all of the reasons above (extended education, living single, unstable job situations,) parents of this age group are more financially supportive of their children than previous generations needed to be. Smith states that the average parent will invest almost \$40,000 in their child over the seventeen-year period between 18 and 34.'

Because of these factors, the normal things that define being an adult, such as graduating school, having a stable job, achieving financial dependence, and starting a family, are significantly delayed. What happens to an emerging adult during that gap?

'During this time frame, emerging adults experience a freedom that is historically unparalleled,' writes Smith. 'For many, this age is marked not only by a lot of fun and growth but also by a great deal of transience, confusion, anxiety, self obsession, melodrama, conflict, stress, disappointment, and sometimes emotional damage and bodily harm. It is a phase of life that needs to be taken seriously for American religion to be fully understood.'

Religious commitment

One important finding that Smith discovers with emerging adults is that, 'A little more than half of emerging adults remain quite stable in their levels of religious commitment and practice or lack thereof... The primary conclusion about emerging adult religion, therefore, is not one of change but of continuity. More often than not, what's past is prologue.'

This is great news for people in high school youth ministry who often feel that their teenagers lose their faith in college and all their efforts were for no effect. On the contrary,

'empirical evidence tells us that it does in fact matter for emerging adult religious outcomes whether or not youth have had non-parental adults in their religious congregations to whom they could turn for help and support. It matters whether or not teenagers have belonged to congregations offering youth groups that they actually liked and wanted to be a part of... Adult engagement with, role modeling for, and formation of youth simply matters a great deal for how they turn out after they leave teenage years.'

Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell is a must read for anyone involved in youth or 'emerging adult' ministry. It provides a clearer view of a complicated age group, and by doing so can inspire new initiatives to more effectively engage emerging adults with the message of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford University Press, 2009. Kindle edition, location 128.
2. *Ibid.*, location 132
3. *Ibid.*, location 102
4. *Ibid.*, location 105
5. *Ibid.*, location 105
6. *Ibid.*, location 119
7. *Ibid.*, location 5729
8. *Ibid.*, location 5785
9. *Ibid.*, location 5843.

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