

Executive Summary

A new life stage called *emerging adulthood* has opened up as young adult identity formation and its accompanying shift into adulthood has been delayed by 5 to 7 years since the 1980s.

Emerging adulthood is characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and a focus on possibilities.¹ This stage can be described as a psychosocial development moratorium in that the development of social roles and personal identity is temporarily suspended. Emerging adulthood is a time when prior commitments are up for renegotiation.

This study looks at young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 who had a Christian religious affiliation as a teen and who attended religious services at least monthly at some point during their teen years.² **We intentionally chose a young adult population whose teenage religious engagement was more than nominal. It is important to remember this as you read this report.**

Emerging adulthood works against young adults staying engaged in their faith and the life of the Church because it disrupts young adults' access to Christian communities and makes it difficult for them to negotiate meaningful roles in Christian communities.

Identity formation ushers in adulthood, bringing with it the capacity to make commitments, including faith commitments. The delay in identity formation that comes with emerging adulthood means it is after high school, when young adults are in their twenties, that most of them are forming their identities and making their faith commitments.

According to psychologist Erik Erikson, identity is formed when an individual negotiates a role in a community. Emerging adulthood often finds young adults living away from family, their home church and other Christian communities at the point in life where they are negotiating these roles. This means they are unlikely to negotiate a role in a Christian community.

A job market that demands ever greater levels of postsecondary education means that young adults are spending more time in postsecondary studies, delaying entry into the job market, and, in many cases, remaining dependent on their parents into their twenties. Continuing parental dependence makes forming an identity apart from one's family of origin (differentiation) more difficult. In some cases, young adults who do not have access to traditional differentiators of place, marriage and profession are differentiating themselves from their parents by rejecting their parents' faith.

¹ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 7–9; Erikson, *Identity*, 156.

² See methodology section in appendix.

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To continue on in a faith community, young adults need to renegotiate their childhood roles as adult roles. Mentors can help with this renegotiation by reintroducing young adults to a church community currently familiar with them in their childhood roles framed by their family of origin. Through this reintroduction, mentors use their status in the community to help young adults forge new roles, and in so doing they provide a means of differentiation *within* the church community. Young adults who had home church mentors were more than three times as likely to connect with new churches or parishes after moving out of their parents' home and to connect with a Christian campus group after starting postsecondary studies.

Youth groups and Christian camps help young adults in maturation by encouraging them to negotiate new roles by which they differentiate themselves from their family of origin while still remaining within Christian community. These alongside-but-within-the-church communities also provide opportunities for faith-reinforcing friendships to form, friendships that are vital for faith persistence. Young adults who had been involved with Christian camps either as teen campers or camp staff were roughly three times as likely to connect with a Christian campus group and at least twice as likely to connect with a new church or parish after having moved out.

The roles that mentors, youth groups and Christian camps help young adults negotiate provide avenues for differentiation within the faith and reduce the likelihood that religion will be the territory on which young adults choose to stake out an identity that is different from their parents'. Moreover, they help young adults to grow up and find their place faster and, significantly, to find that place *within* the Church. Mentors seem to have their most positive impact on religious persistence when they continue to walk with young adults into and through emerging adulthood.

Young adults often find non-confrontational ways to exit the church: even when they reject their parents' faith, they often find ambiguous ways to express their disagreement, so that parents can plausibly figure their children still share their beliefs.

University is becoming a near-universal aspiration for young adults. More than four in five young adults who had attended university and almost half of those who had attended college said they always knew they wanted to go to university. Young adults want university to be seen as an autonomous choice, although many of those we interviewed acknowledged significant parental pressure to attend.

Those who took a gap year, which was sometimes understood to be a one-year discipleship program, between high school and postsecondary studies were more likely to attend religious services as an adult, to have had a home church mentor, to connect with a new church after moving out of their parents' home and to connect with a Christian campus group. Gap year activities vary, and the trajectory of young adults who took a gap year may vary by how the year was spent. Young adults who went straight into postsecondary studies fared worse on all our measures of religious persistence than those who had taken a gap year.

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The most pressing postsecondary decision for young adults is not career but education. Career is often seen as a moving and unknowable target. Many young adults saw a career as a reflection of their identity and were not able to choose a career because the question of their identity was not settled. Most young adults knew, however, that they wanted to avoid dull, passionless, monotonous work.

Young adults whose giftings and talents were identified and who were encouraged to consider a career that made use of those talents were often able to see a trajectory for their lives. Parents, friends and teachers most often provided this encouragement, while pastors and ministry leaders least often provided it. Many young adults identified a career or calling while working in a leadership role or in an environment where others identified their gifts and talents and encouraged them.

Young adults are roughly three times more likely to connect with a new church after moving out of their parents' home if someone from their home congregation tries to make a connection for them. Similarly, young adults going on to postsecondary studies are four times more likely to connect with a Christian campus group or chaplaincy if someone from their home church tries to make a connection for them. Many groups, especially those with a strong sense of identity, are by their nature exclusive, and most young adults need someone to create a way in for them through either an invitation or an introduction.

Roughly three-quarters of young adults who go on to connect with either a campus group or a new church do so within the first month of starting at a new school or new location. This means that making timely connections with new Christian communities is critical.

Nearly four in five MWS say young adults are responsible for making connections to new Christian campus communities themselves. Three in five MWS say they share this responsibility with young adults, but fewer than three in ten say they have a ministry plan for making these connections. Significantly, only about a quarter of young adults reported that someone from their home church tried to make a connection for them to either a new church or a Christian campus group.

Some church-based ministry leaders are reluctant to connect young adults to campus ministries for fear of losing young adult leaders. Some campus ministries are finding innovative ways to partner with churches in order to create win-win young adult ministries.

Social media with its never-ending feed of beautiful and interesting images provides a new, dynamic and global point of comparison for young adults that leads them to doubt their achievements and question their goals. Constant comparison and the resulting self-doubt inhibits identity formation, goal setting and commitment.

Although emerging adulthood is an unprecedented time of opportunity for young adults it has also spawned a collection of new fears and anxieties. The Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO), the Fear

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of Not Being Amazing (FNBA), and the Fear Of Passionless Monotony (FOPM) press in on young adults ever more as they approach age 30, which, for many, marks the limit of emerging adulthood and a forced entry into adulthood.

We found Catholics keep 55% of their more-than-nominal teen affiliates into young adulthood, Mainline Protestants keep 53% and Evangelicals keep 64%. While a third of church teen affiliates are moving to the ranks of the combined group of Atheist, Agnostic, Spiritual and None (AASN), there is a new development. About one in twenty Christian teens are converting by the time of young adulthood to other world religions, usually Buddhism and Islam.

About half of teens continued their level of religious service attendance into young adulthood, while 45% said their attendance level dropped and only 6% reported an increase.

Many young adults talked about discovering a shared religious ethic behind all religions. They describe this ethic as leading one to become a good human and promoting social harmony. This discovery has led them to conclude that religious differences are only apparent and that those who insist on religious differences are sowing division. We call this belief the Universal Gnostic Religious Ethic (UGRE). This ethic posits that religion fulfills a set of psychosocial functions and any religion that fills these functions is a good one. The UGRE is a strategy for dealing with religious difference.

A consequence of the UGRE is that to insist on a personality or identity for God is to promote religious difference. Many young adults preferred to talk about a higher power rather than God. The higher power they described was deistic in that it was uninterested and uninvolved in their lives, although many continued to hope the power might intervene in their lives to help them.

Some young adults seeing moral debates play out in the political arena have concluded that moral debates are really political ones. They then take the next step of concluding that politics does not belong in the Church, by which they mean moral discussion is disallowed.

Young adults who persist in the faith into young adulthood are well integrated into churches and other Christian communities. Warm relationships with parents who live out their faith are vital for faith formation; however, when it comes time to develop a Christian identity apart from one's parents, young adults need persisting communities of faithful adults, mentors and friends in their lives. When young adults move, it is vital that families, churches and ministries work to get them connected to new Christian communities in a timely manner. Young adults also need Christians and ministry leaders to identify their gifts and talents. Significantly, they also need mentors to pose the question "How might God be calling you to serve him with the gifts and talents he's given you?"