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Emerging Young Adult Spiritual Formation: A Developmental Approach for an Intergenerational Church

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EMERGING YOUNG ADULT SPIRITUAL FORMATION: A DEVELOPMENTAL
APPROACH FOR AN INTERGENERATIONAL CHURCH

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By

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing disconnect between young adults and the church. Research into this specific and recent phase of life shows how cultural trends have shaped the spiritual lives of emerging adults. This dissertation claims that the loss of relevancy of the church for young adults is rooted in how the church has either capitulated or ignored these trends. Section 1 addresses the current immature faith that is endemic in many contemporary churches. The church's history and the culture within which it is embedded are examined. Section 2 describes other approaches to spiritual formation of young adults. Section 3 asserts that the developmental research of James Fowler is an interpretive lens for evaluating and developing young adult spiritual formation. Examining the barriers to a maturing faith through this lens will give direction for Christian leaders to create a coherent spiritual formation process. I conclude that an intergenerational community can develop a strong coherent faith for emerging adults. Creating an environment that supports and involves generations together will help shape their faith. Sections 4 and 5 outline a mentoring guide for older adults to connect with younger adults. This is designed as a tool for developing a maturing faith through the local church. Section 6 reflects on possible further research. The last section is the mentoring guide.

SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Church leaders are increasingly concerned about the exodus of young adults from their churches. Recent studies have documented the increasing percentage of those who are leaving.¹ David Kinnaman reports that many youth who attend church are enthusiastic in their faith, but they lose that enthusiasm as they transition to young adulthood.² He states that there is a 43 percent decline in church involvement between the teen and early adult years.³ He says, “A majority say they are less active in church today compared to when they were age fifteen.”⁴ Christian Smith reports a similar trend by examining the results of the 2007-2008 National Survey of Youth and Religion. He documents a change in religious adherence from ages 13-17 to ages 18-23. Church attendance declined about 25%.⁵ Also, there was an average decline of 10% in the significance of religion shaping their lives.⁶ Smith discovered that there is a growing trend among emerging adults to not identify with any religion.⁷ The concern is the continuing loss of affiliation for young

¹ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 259.

² David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Kindle eBook, loc. 232-233.

³ *Ibid.*, loc. 250-251.

⁴ *Ibid.*, loc. 270-271.

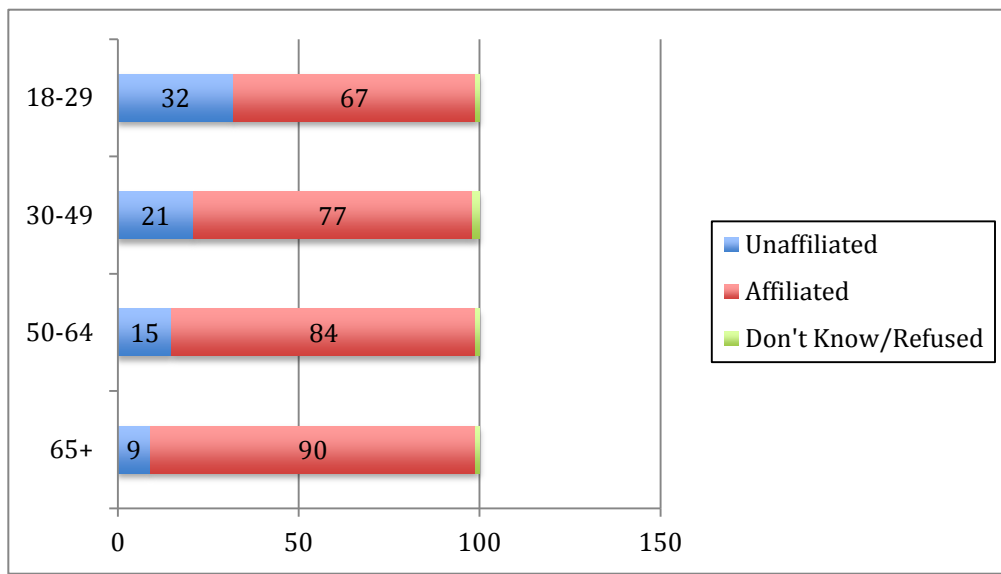
⁵ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

adults. As seen in the 2012 Pew research survey below, young adults are far less likely to identify themselves with any religion.

Religious Affiliation by Age



Source: Pew Research Foundation 2012⁸

One example may act as a typical case study. James attended church up until the time he went to college. His family was faithful attenders but did not involve themselves beyond Sunday mornings. He went to youth group semi-regularly and enjoyed it. Sunday church was boring to him but he went out of respect for his parents. When James went to college, he did not attend church and was challenged about many of the presuppositions he had about his faith. He began to party and enjoy his newfound freedom. He loved his parents but did not relate to their faith anymore. After college, his parents were puzzled that he did not attend church with them. His reply was that it just wasn't for him. James

⁸ Pew Research Center, "Nones on the Rise," Pew Religion & Public Life Project, October 9, 2012, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

said he was spiritual but not religious. His focus was on his career and having fun with friends on weekends. James may be unaware of external and internal influences that compel him to disengage with the church.

Many theories have been proposed to explain this problem. Some blame the secular world in which young adults live.⁹ Others cite parental influence.¹⁰ Each of these has validity. One possibility is the weak religious environment into which young adults have been socialized.¹¹ But the problem is not merely a church attendance problem. Many young adults' spiritual lives are not fully developed for the challenges they face. The faith they received was not substantial enough to sustain them in all the multiplicity of change they encounter. The faith they inherited was not fully formed. Kinnaman states, "The dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language, it's a disciple-making problem."¹²

The process of spiritual development is being undermined by the current immature faith that is endemic in many contemporary churches. Kenda Creasy Dean assesses church ministry in light of her research. She claims that church spiritual development is "failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating youth."¹³

There is a sense that we have lost something along the way in seeking to instill the faith

⁹ Laurie Goodstein Stolberg and Sheryl Gay, "Pope Praises U.S., but Warns of Secular Challenges," *New York Times*, April 17, 2008, accessed June 9, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/17/us/nationalspecial2/17pope.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

¹⁰ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 155.

¹¹ Jeremy E. Uecker, Mark D. Regnerus, and Margret L. Vaaler, "Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood," *Social Forces* 85, no. 4 (June 2007): 1667-1692, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/229890465?accountid=11085>.

¹² Kinnaman, loc. 236-237.

¹³ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

in the next generation. Kinnaman adds, “The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully.”¹⁴ For those who lead churches, this decline is not only a concern, but also a call for action. To implement that action in the concrete life of a local church is the thrust of this paper.

Using Robert Fowler’s faith stage development theory, this paper proposes an interpretive lens for evaluating young adult spiritual formation. I will examine how historical church practices, the social world of young adults, and the wider postmodern influences can be barriers to their development. Evaluating these barriers and proceeding to apply life stage development theories will give direction for Christian leaders to develop a coherent spiritual formation program through the local church. In this way, they can strengthen young adults’ faith as they transition in life.

Delayed Markers of Adulthood

Young adulthood is a distinct stage of life that has delayed their journey to adulthood. People age 18-28 are no longer adolescents and not quite adults. This phase of life does not fit the characteristics of adolescence or adulthood. Little research had been conducted on the new developments in young adults at the beginning of the 21st century,¹⁵ but recently the sociological work of Christian Smith and Kenda Creasy Dean has provided a link between youth and young adult faith formation. Some have called this

¹⁴ Kinnaman, loc. 236-238.

¹⁵ Jeffery Arnett states because of the quickness of change in young adults, this period of life has not been thoroughly studied by scholars. See Jeffery Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner, *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. 1st ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 4.

middle stage as prolonged adolescence,¹⁶ others post-adolescence.¹⁷ Because this middle stage is viewed as not quite youth, not quite adult, it is often referred to as delayed adolescence. Jeffrey Arnett employs the more positive term “emerging adults” to describe this stage.¹⁸ It carries none of the negative connotations of remaining adolescent and views this time of life as constant change. Emerging adulthood is characterized by exploring new directions in life. With their desire to be self-sufficient, commitments of all kinds are delayed. They are taking longer to launch their careers, get married, and establish independence financially. For instance, in 2000 46% of women and 30% of men had made these major decisions by age 30 compared to 77% of women and 65% of men in the 60s.¹⁹

Arnett contends that there are three markers as they transition to adulthood. First is the ability to accept responsibility for oneself, second the ability to make independent decisions, and third financial independence.²⁰ For them, the importance of being self-sufficient without dependency on one’s parents is an indication for becoming an adult. Capacity to accept that responsibly and make independent decisions are the qualities of their emerging identity.²¹

¹⁶ Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 3.

¹⁷ Friedrich Schweitzer, *The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for the Church Today* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 69.

¹⁸ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 3.

¹⁹ Jeffery Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner, *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. 1st ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 11.

²⁰ Jeffrey J. Arnett, “Learning to Stand Alone: The Contemporary American Transition to Adulthood in Cultural and Historical Context,” *Human Development* 41, no.5 (Sept-Dec 1998): 301, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/224011897?accountid=11085>.

²¹ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 296.

The reasons for this delay are many. Christian Smith notes six cultural trends that contribute to this delay. First is the growing importance of higher education. As young people pursue their careers, pressure is exerted to get the schooling they need to succeed. Because of this, often the second trend of delayed marriage occurs. Third, there are the changes in the American and global economy that undermine stable lifelong careers. This also postpones marriage and extends schooling so that young people can maximize their options. Fourth, parents are willing to support them as they attempt to establish themselves. Fifth, the technology of birth control separates sex from reproduction. The risk of having children is decreased, as sexual intercourse does not necessarily lead to parenthood. Lastly, the philosophy of postmodernism creates hyper-individualistic views of life and a relativistic morality.²² These delays extend their transitions to adulthood, creating a stage of life that is distinct from previous times in the life cycle.

The Transitional Nature of Emerging Adulthood

As young adults transition from adolescence to adulthood, they have a sense of being in between stages. They may feel alone and have to invent their own ways of making decisions and seeking support for those decisions. Once a youth leaves high school, they are left to feel they must figure out life on their own.²³ This can seem daunting with new roles and responsibilities that have to be learned. They are learning to

²² Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Kindle eBook, loc. 258-305.

²³ Arnett and Tanner, 35.

renegotiate their identity in the midst of transitions.²⁴ Those transitions test their loyalties.²⁵ One of those loyalties is the religion in which they were raised. They are questioning their faith and working through the process to become an adult.²⁶ For young adults, this means a space is needed to process their faith as they transition in life. But many young adults do not think that church is a safe place to express their questions and doubts.²⁷ While the reality of young adult transitions can be part of the reasons they leave, knowing how the church contributed to the problem can give insight to how to navigate a course change.

The Problem of the Adolescent Shape of the Contemporary Church

Thomas Bergler states that the present condition of American church culture has an undeveloped spirituality. Efforts to attract and keep young people in church have been undermined by the juvenile nature of the church. The immature faith development of young adults can be traced to their experiences in youth ministries.

Youth groups historically have created environments meant to respond to a troubled world and the hope that youth would be able to save it. Reacting in fear that a crisis was happening in society, youth organizations such as Youth for Christ and Young Life were developed to evangelize youth. Youth leaders saw reaching teenagers as the

²⁴ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 34.

²⁵ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 78.

²⁶ Mark Cannister, "Moratorium Matters: Creating a Fertile Environment for Faith Formation." Breakout session presented at the AYME conference, Chicago, IL. October 20, 2013.

²⁷ Kinnaman, loc. 120.

hope to save a crumbling civilization.²⁸ Bergler states, “Evangelical Protestants insisted that only mass evangelization of young people could save the world from destruction.”²⁹ The appeal to youth became a driving force of evangelical efforts for parachurch and church youth groups. To do so, they adopted music styles that were prevalent with youth. Christian music reflected the emotionally intense, romantic spirituality derived from popular music.³⁰ Interactive games and topical messages were also used to keep youth’s interest. The focus was on attracting youth, not developing youth.

Evangelicals as they aged were accustomed to that style and implemented it in their churches. An environment of attraction took priority over discipleship. What changed was how youth were discipled. The gospel was primarily about a God who was available to meet personal needs. Faith began being shaped by consumer values.³¹ The individualistic nature of a personal relationship with God, the emotionally charged music, and the blending of pop culture with church culture all contributed to this juvenile nature of contemporary churches. In a laudable attempt to incarnate the Gospel for youth, the spiritual depth of young adults has been compromised. Historic Christian formation atrophied by keeping the church in an adolescent state instead of challenging it to a process of maturity. Bergler claims that “Juvenilization is the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become

²⁸ Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), Kindle eBook, loc. 289-295.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, loc. 329-330.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, loc. 2260.

³¹ *Ibid.*, locs. 2048 and 2079.

accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages.”³² This therapeutic self-fulfillment gospel has resulted in a self-centered faith.³³ This “juvenilization” impedes young adults from having a deep and holistic spiritual life.³⁴ The focus on self-fulfillment places authority not in religious convictions, but on the individual self.³⁵ It can leave young adults with theological beliefs that are inarticulate and unable to give them guidance.³⁶ What is missing is a framework upon which to build their lives.

While Bergler points out the problem of the church’s reaction to the culture in that past, he does not address the cultural trends that Christian Smith’s research had engaged. He admits that “Every enculturation of Christianity highlights some elements of the faith and obscures others.”³⁷ What he misses is the present social condition in which young adult’s faith is being shaped today. Smith presents the predominate belief system in our culture that contributes to an underdeveloped faith. It is what he calls the ideology of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. It is Deistic in that youth believe in a God who is not involved with their life except when they need help. It is moralistic as it presents a God who wants them to be good so they can go to heaven when they die. Lastly, it is therapeutic where being happy is a primary drive for their lives.³⁸ These beliefs inherited by young adults contribute to their adolescent faith.³⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean bluntly states

³² Ibid., loc. 81-83.

³³ Ibid., loc. 3129-3130.

³⁵ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford Press, 2005), 177.

³⁶ Bergler, loc. 3130.

³⁷ Bergler, loc. 3162-3163.

³⁸ Dean, 14.

³⁹ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162-171.

that teenagers practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism because they have learned it from the church. Young adults are not becoming a part of the church and those who have shaped the present church are responsible.⁴⁰ They taught them that the faith in which they were raised was not central to their lives. Smith relates five key beliefs held by those who embrace Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

1. God created the world and watches over it.
2. God wants people to be nice and fair, like most religions teach.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be involved with one's life except when there is a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.⁴¹

One example of how this has affected young adults is in their moral choices. In the world of young adults, views on morality are not often coherent. According Christian Smith's research, 60% of young adults they interviewed had a highly individualistic outlook to morality.⁴² Individual decisions were based on personal opinions without reference to any belief system.⁴³ Smith notes they inherited it from the world into which they have been socialized.⁴⁴ The spiritual life of young adults has been co-opted by it.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Dean, 3.

⁴¹ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 154.

⁴² Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition*, loc. 419.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, loc. 508.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, loc. 215.

⁴⁵ Dean, 29.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a counterfeit understanding of Christianity. Dean candidly declares that it “parasitically sucks the life-giving power” of the gospel.⁴⁶ Like Dean, Kinnaman concludes that young people are faced with a contrast between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and an impotent Americanized version of that faith.⁴⁷ Bergler states, “Adolescent churches are more likely to conform to the supposed needs or desires of young people than they are to shoulder the more difficult task of spiritually forming the young.”⁴⁸ Pete Ward also cites that the methods and structure of youth groups tended to foster childlike dependency. Ward’s premise is that the adolescent phase of life has been hindered by the inability of those groups to help youth transition to adulthood. The limited roles of participation in the church and the lack of engagement outside of the church all contribute to a retarding of the spiritual formation process. This juvenilization contributes to young adults’ disconnect with the spiritual life of the church.⁴⁹ Those youth who want to grow into adulthood have to leave the church because there is no place for them.⁵⁰

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is better understood beyond the institution of church itself against a larger cultural framework.⁵¹ Smith declares “Most young adults are what sociologists call social constructionists.”⁵² In line with the culture of relativity,

⁴⁶ Dean, 13-14.

⁴⁷ Kinnaman, loc. 369-371.

⁴⁸ Ibid., loc. 258-259.

⁴⁹ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 172-179.

⁵⁰ Pete Ward, *Growing up Evangelical: Youthwork and the Making of a Subculture* (London: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 195-198.

⁵¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012), 4.

young adults construct their lives from many sources. Wuthnow calls them “tinkerers.”⁵³ They borrow from the past but construct life in new ways. Their world is not fixed but is constructed by the social world that surrounds them. Wuthnow posits, “Spiritual tinkering is a reflection of the pluralistic religious society in which we live.”⁵⁴ What can be lost is the grounding upon which to understand their lives.

Christian Smith’s research and observation about the social environment of young adults has reinforced what church leaders have known. Youth and young adult’s spiritual lives are drifting in their understanding of religion and commitments to Christian community. The predominate beliefs of young adults is what Christian Smith calls the theology of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. But both Mark Cannister and Theresa O’Keefe critique Christian Smith’s conclusions based on the NSYR.⁵⁵ They state that the kind of questioning that youth and young adults are asked do not take into account to what degree the interviewees have progressed in their faith stage development. This may skew the way they reply to questioning. The conclusion is that the spiritual condition of youth may not be as bleak as Smith’s analysis posits. Bass also sees hopefulness in the emerging adults. She cites the trend that spirituality is more than a religion. They are moving from a “religion *about* God to being an experience *of* God.”⁵⁶ They may not attend church but their desire for spirituality is strong. This is a helpful insight for those

⁵² Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 50.

⁵³ Wuthnow, 15

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁵ Mark Cannister, *Teenagers Matter: Making Student Ministry a Priority in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013) pp. 64-67 and Theresa O’Keefe, 2013. “Competing Value Worlds: The Felt Reality of Emerging Adults”, Lecture, AYME conference, Chicago, IL. October 20, used by permission.

⁵⁶ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 110.

who read Smith's diagnosis. Though the statistics seem bleak this may be an opportunity for a more authentic spirituality than when attending the church was a cultural expectation. But what Cannister and O'Keefe may be missing is the sociological realities of the very different transitional challenges that face emerging adults than even twenty years ago. Young adult commitments are being affected by the delay of developmental processes. Christian Smith points out that therapeutic individualism, the positivism of scientific progress and consumer capitalism contribute to young adults disconnect with older adult frameworks of spiritual life.⁵⁷ What Smith offers is a wider understanding of the distinct social environment that young adults now inhabit.

This is an important observation; the social world of young adults has changed. Many demographic surveys have concluded this fact along with the trend of young adults declining involvement in church. One reality is that young adults increasingly have no religious framework to make spiritual commitments. Also, if our observation of the present immature faith development in church is true, then indeed young adults have not had the opportunity to develop enough both in comprehension of questions about faith and how faith and their lives integrate.

Smith points out the cultural influences that have shaped the present condition of young adults. He shows that beyond a person's individual decisions and actions are the social contexts in which one's life is embedded.⁵⁸ It involves understanding the past and present social environment of young adults. Christian Smith concludes, that, "We need to see, for example, how those individuals have been socialized—how their assumptions,

⁵⁷ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 172-189.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

beliefs, and aspirations have been formed and internalized.”⁵⁹ We now explore these wider cultural influences in postmodern thought, consumer values and the global pressures on young adults’ lives.

The Influence of Postmodernity

Postmodernity is the social environment in which young adults live. The confidence of the modern era in objective truth, human progress and a structured universe all came into question. Postmodern thinking reacted to the idea that human reasoning’s purpose was to control the world; instead it was to understanding it.⁶⁰ It rejects modernity’s understanding that there is objective knowledge waiting to be discovered.⁶¹ Instead it is socially constructed.⁶² It is relative to the context of the community in which it resides. Grenz believes that there are two common assumptions in postmodern thought. One is that all reality is constructed and not objectively true.⁶³ This makes all truth claims relative. The second is that no one has a large enough perspective to claim what is true. Postmodernity deconstructs the idea that there is any unifying narrative. This creates an environment where mature faith is becoming more difficult to achieve. To assert that Christianity is the one way of truth is resisted. The increasing exposure to the plurality of differing religions reifies this in many young adults thinking. Christianity is just one

⁵⁹ Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition*, loc. 2973.

⁶⁰ Peter Augustine Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought*, American Intellectual Culture (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 2-3.

⁶¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 131.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 43.

religion among many. The relativising effect is that each person defines what is true for oneself. This does affect emerging adult's attitudes towards religious affiliation.⁶⁴ What has occurred is that religious belief is not assumed to be a part of one's life. Charles Taylor remarks that society has created an environment where, "it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believers, is one human possibility among others."⁶⁵

The transitional nature of young adults is part of what Friedrich Schweitzer calls the postmodern life cycle.⁶⁶ He states that there are changes within a person's lifecycle, but also changes of the lifecycle itself because of the postmodern environment. The way the life cycle operates itself has changed.⁶⁷ The pluralistic environment within which young adults are embedded has strongly influenced them in "intellectualized conceptions of truth and religious meaning."⁶⁸ Schweitzer questions whether the religious development of young people correlates with their distance from their church and rigid religious affiliation. Two factors that contribute to this, one, is that in their own development they are reevaluating the environment from which they have been raised. Second, the culture within which they are embedded has also undergone drastic change.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

⁶⁶ Schweitzer, *The Postmodern Life Cycle*, 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 71.

Faith development itself has become a life-long project.⁶⁹ Schweitzer notes that, “Life has become a project for which everyone is responsible by himself or herself.”⁷⁰ With fluid and ambiguous roles, young adults are immersed in a culture where there is no assumed belief system from which to gain insight. This effects how they view religion. Christian Smith notes some major trends in emerging adult’s religious views. They are:

- Talking about religion isn’t a threatening topic of discussion; its just not that important in their lives.
- There is a blending of religious ideals. They are pluralistic, holding to more than one ideology as equal validity.
- They feel that all religions have a similar commonality. The religious particularities are peripheral.
- Religion is helpful, but not authoritative. Religion exists to support individuals. Each person is to choose for him or herself what to believe.
- For many, they associate the religion of their parents with dependence.
- The church is exclusive. The church is perceived as exclusive. It is not a place to find belonging. The church is not a safe place to express doubts.
- Religion is not what most young adults organize their lives around.⁷¹

When Christian Smith interviewed a young lady on different religions she replied that, “ I just think it’s all subjective to each person. I really do think that everything is pretty much subjective.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁷¹ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 144-158.

This affects the moral choices of many emerging adults. Christian Smith points out that young adult's thinking about right and wrong is not intellectually coherent. He observes that, "Six out of ten (60 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed expressed a highly individualistic approach to morality." Morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision.⁷³ People who adhere to individualistic morality resist expressing moral beliefs for fear of imposing them on others. Smith cautions, while avoiding being nonjudgmental is good,⁷⁴ being morally individualistic tends to make people not think they are obligated for caring for others in need.⁷⁵ This dark side of emerging adulthood is troublesome for the present moral dilemmas America is facing. It is equally concerning for emerging adult's welfare as they navigate their lives and make decisions that will effect others and the moral resolve of the country.

Postmodernity's effect is not all bad. Smith has revealed a number of factors that contribute to an undeveloped or underdeveloped faith. Postmodern questioning of faith is also a part of the developing faith of emerging adulthood. Kinnaman notes that one of the reasons some young adults leave the church is because their questions and views are not welcomed. They are rejecting the church's own values of compromise with cultural assumptions. Kinnaman notes that they are "caught between the church as it is and what they believe it is called to be."⁷⁶ Later we will examine why postmodernity's critique can reveal weaknesses of a church still caught in modernity.

⁷² Ibid., 49.

⁷³ Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition*, loc. 420- 422.

⁷⁴ Ibid., loc. 494.

⁷⁵ Ibid., loc. 515-516.

⁷⁶ Kinnaman, loc. 1208.

The Influence of Consumerism

Developing spiritual formation is contravened in large part by another overarching reality: consumerism. Consumerism's materialist value has been critiqued for its destabilizing effect on young adults.⁷⁷ Marketing is entrenched in the consumer-driven economy of desire. It appeals to real desires of identity, satisfying relationships, and making meaning of one's life. These are part of a larger of consumer society that affects the spiritual formation of young adults.⁷⁸

In Smith and Denton's research, they state that almost all the young adults they interviewed desired to achieve the American dream. The drive for achieving it pushes them in their career pursuits and a desire for gain. Vincent Miller recounts that consumer desire is more than hedonism. "It is not focused on sensual pleasure. It is not particularly attached to objects of consumption."⁷⁹ It commodifies with a promise of personal fulfillment.⁸⁰ The consumer society is not only about providing economic needs but it defines those who live within it. What young adults emerging out of their teens may be unaware of is that the identity of the market has shaped them to be a commodity. It is a major force for their identity formation as they move from teens to young adults. Adult

⁷⁷ James E Burroughs and Aric Rindfleisch, "Materialism and Well-Being: A Conflicting Values Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, no. 3 (December 2002): 348, accessed June 12, 2013. <http://dx.doi.org/0093-5301/2003/2903-000>.

⁷⁸ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 177.

⁷⁹ Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Society* (University of Michigan: Continuum International Publishing, 2005), 114.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

role assumptions are prolonged by mass-consumer values.⁸¹ Those who aspire to work out the implications of a Christian faith are co-opted by how consumerism works against their identity as Christ followers.

The Influence of Globalization

Christian spiritual formation occurs in the face of increasing multicultural and multireligious interaction. Globalization is the bringing together of ideologies and peoples from many cultures that influence and interact with each other. Robertson's definition is that "Globalization as a concept refers to both the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole, its main empirical focus is in line with the increasing acceleration in both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole and in the twentieth century."⁸² The global economy affects the job prospects of young adults. The increase of competition for the best jobs creates stress for their career aspirations.

Global religious awareness further adds to pluralistic tendencies. While the interconnectivity of the world has increased, traditional religious ideology has lost some of its particularity. Globalization's diminishing of national boundaries increased the influence of diverse philosophies and religious beliefs. For young adults, they must weigh

⁸¹ Erik Erickson, *Youth and Identity and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1968), 132.

⁸² Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Pub., 1992), 8. Quoted in Richard Robert Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany*, Studies in Practical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003), 61.

the truth claims of Christianity in this increasing pluralistic world.⁸³ With that, historical religious beliefs and practices have been marginalized. Osmer and Schweitzer describe this “detraditionalization” as the “breakdown of the intergenerational process of introducing the next generation to the Christian tradition.”⁸⁴ They point out the difficulty of not only the content of religious tradition but also the role of that tradition. With more people lacking any Christian understanding it makes it difficult to convey the faith. Globalization increases the difficulty of identity formation in young adults. Osmer and Schweitzer point out that the interconnection with other cultures has produced the result of a “processive” view of life.⁸⁵ The markers of personal identity are shifting. This is not only occurring in adolescence but often throughout a person’s life cycle.

These influences have had an impact on the way church has evolved. The maturing of faith is hindered by the adolescent nature of the church and the culture that has helped shape it. To understand how faith can mature in a postmodern culture can be enhanced by the work of James Fowler. The focus for this paper is on how understanding the developmental process will give insight for the spiritual formation of emerging young adults. There are other alternative insights and solutions that have merit as well. We now examine those alternatives.

⁸³ Friedrich Schweitzer, “Youth and Religion: Theoretical, Empirical, and Practical Perspectives from Germany” in *Youth, Religion and Globalization: New Research in Practical Theology*, eds. Richard Robert Osmer and Kenda Creasy Dean (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 17-58.

⁸⁴ Richard Robert Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub., 2003), 20-21.

⁸⁵ James W. Fowler, Richard Robert Osmer, and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Developing a Public Faith: New Directions in Practical Theology: Essays in Honor of James W. Fowler* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 145.

SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Leadership Development Perspective: Tim Elmore

Tim Elmore expresses a deep concern for the millennial generation's future. Leadership development is needed. Equipping the next generation to mature in their self-leadership is explained. He claims that the younger generation is struggling because they have been deceived by the messages that older adults have given them.¹ One main contributing factor is the self-esteem movement that has focused on affirmation but without accountability. Elmore evaluates the trends of the millennial generation and sees them as troubling.² Affluence, parenting styles, media influence, education's inadequate preparation, postmodern thought, and a culture of convenience have all contributed to the present dilemma.³ His solution is that they need guidance. He argues that a more interactive relationship that is both attentive to the needs of youth and also holds them accountable for their own responsibilities is vital for equipping them for the future.⁴ While young adults are expressing their need for autonomy, developing responsibility is equally important.⁵ What is needed is leadership to be involved with their lives. Elmore's focus on maturity verses self-expression and independence is a vital message for developing spiritual lives.⁶ The individualistic tendencies can be reinforced as emerging

¹ Tim Elmore, *Generation Iy: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future* (Atlanta, GA: Poet Gardener Publishing, 2010), 204-209.

² Ibid., 18.

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁵ Ibid., 66-69.

⁶ Ibid., 68.

adults attempt to refine themselves. An understanding of maturing can widen their sense of self.

While Elmore does not address the spiritual development of young adults, he does address one of their main concerns: career development. Since spiritual formation is about all of life, this is an important aspect and one of the most predominate challenges for young adults today. The focus on mentors is a resounding cry among many who work with young adults.⁷ Elmore's book is no Christian self-help guide. He is practical, passionate, and deeply involved with training next-generation leaders and especially those who desire to lead. Because this addresses mainly career and responsibility development for a general audience, it leaves out the more distinct importance of Christian character and belief. When it comes to practical steps for assisting the next generation, Elmore excels. For spiritual formation, more is needed. While Elmore speaks of addressing passion and emotions and not just rational understanding, he does not address the intellectual process or the stage development of young people. Fowler's stage development model will help understand more fully that maturing process of faith.

Cultural Trends Perspective: Diana Butler-Bass

Diana Butler-Bass is religious commentator that observes cultural trends that affect the spirituality of young adulthood. Her best contribution is the clarity about the shifting religious landscape. She notes that young adults have lost confidence in

⁷See Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000) and David P. Setran, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Pub., 2013).

American religion. Unless denominational structures change, they will continually decline; they will prove irrelevant or offensive as they relate to the world.

Diana does not see current trends as discouraging. Although people are not claiming any religious organization as their own, they do claim to be spiritual. More people are claiming to be spiritual than religious. She cites this as a call to the church to attend to the language of spirituality rather than religion. People today desire deeply experiential encounters with God. We need to create new forms of old systems.⁸

She reverses the customary way churches have structured involvement. Traditionally, the importance was that a person must believe first to belong. This illustrates that traditional spiritual formation using educational structures has focused on content. Bass demonstrates that it begins first with belonging, then behaving, and lastly believing. Young people are looking for a place to be accepted and included. As they begin to find their place in a church, they then look for places to express that faith. Lastly, beliefs are shaped.⁹

This has positive ramifications for how people today actually embrace religion. Rational explanations alone are inadequate for spiritual formation. Relational connections take precedence. There are three things that young adults are looking for in their spiritual lives. They desire it to be deeply experiential. They want to encounter God. Secondly, they want it to be personal. A meaningful and even transformative experience is desired. Lastly, they want connection. A place where people know and support each other is highly valued. While these trends are noted by others (see Kinnaman). Bass reveals

⁸ Diana Butler Bass, "Climate Change," Lectures, Associated Ministries Conference, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, February 22-24 2013.

⁹ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 103-136.

young adults' tenuous commitments. They do not want to be a part of organized religion. They think the present church is too focused on money and power, rules and politics. Because of the fear of commitment, they want to come on their own terms and their own schedules.

Bass's contribution to understanding the religious culture of younger generation brings to light the importance of a course change. As a commenter, she excels. But she offers no process for that development. For instance, she notes the decline of liberal church and warns evangelical conservatives that they are following suit. But she offers no convincing way forward. At a conference I attended in the fall of 2013, Bass herself was unclear about the way forward. She was hopeful about young adults' spirituality, but was unsure about how to direct and shape it. She observes that the younger generation has no framework in which to work out their religious ideology. Many of their parents have dropped out of church or dropped out of guiding their children's religious understanding.

Psychological Perspective: Jeffery Arnett

Arnett specifically has addressed the development of young adults. His categorizing them as a new stage of life is insightful. He notes the particular characteristics that describe their phase of life as different from adolescence or adulthood. This is an in-between stage, which he calls "emerging adulthood." Young adults are in a stage of life that is characterized by a crisis. This process requires adjustment and change. They are reordering and recentering their lives.¹⁰ He indicates that there are five of which

¹⁰ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35.

he calls ages of emerging adulthood that can be posed as broad questions young adults ask.¹¹ They are:

1. Identity explorations

They are asking questions about their identity. Arnett states that there is a crisis of going from one stage to another. He states that neither adolescence nor adulthood defines people from 18-28. He states that emerging adulthood is a stage of “Institutional moratorium,” a place of crisis where their identity is stalled in its development.¹² Institutional moratorium is where young adults attending school are not progressing in their self-understanding. They have yet to establish the ability to distinguish for themselves their own values apart from other people.

2. Instability

Young adults’ lives are categorized by constant change. One example is the fact that they change residences more than any other time in their lives. Between the ages of 20 and 30, the rate of moving is at its height. The percentage peaks at 35% compared to the ages of 30 through 40, which is declining from 17-15%.¹³

Another example is that they feel financial instability. They know that economic conditions are not as favorable as previous generations. They delay marriage to secure their career and not make mistakes they may see in their parents.¹⁴

3. Self-Focused

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Ibid., 85.

¹³ Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

They are asking questions about relationships and responsibility. It is a self-focused age. They have little social obligations and commitments compared to adults after 30. Their desire for relationship may come in tension with their newfound autonomy.¹⁵ Commitments of all kinds are delayed.

4. Feeling In Between

They are asking questions about what it means to be adult. They have a sense of being in between stages. They may feel alone and have to invent their own ways of making decisions and seeking support for those decisions.

5. Possibilities

They have questions about the future, but are very optimistic.

Arnett as a psychologist gives great insight into the developmental process of young adults. He keenly observes their personal world. Their ideology is marked by their pursuit of identity formation. Their religious beliefs are being shaped by their need to differentiate themselves from their parents' beliefs. In their effort to become one's own person, they are likely to leave previous beliefs behind. Arnett asserts that these beliefs must be abandoned because the developmental process demands it.¹⁶

In shaping the spirituality of young adults, psychological categories can be helpful in understanding their world. But it falls short in two regards. One is that it focuses primarily on the individual. The social context and how larger forces of the postmodern world influence their choices and belief structures would give a wider perspective. Secondly, while Arnett excels from a psychological perspective, a deeper understanding

¹⁵ Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults in America*, 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

of why beliefs are abandoned is needed. His minimizing of early religious training goes against the sociological research conclusions of Christian Smith and Kenda Creasy Dean.¹⁷ They give a fuller picture of why beliefs are abandoned.

Christian Education Perspective: Gary Parrett and J.I. Packer

Parrett and Packer address spiritual formation from a Christian education perspective. Their emphasis is on passing the content of the faith to future generations. Their opening chapter divulges their interest. “Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way” is a call to return to the ancient practice of catechesis. They point to the fact that there is a lack of training in churches today and the lack of Christian understanding in the faith. They cite the reasons for the decline of training in the faith.¹⁸ The importance of understanding a person's belief is one important aspect of spiritual formation. They do cite the importance of process as well. In a brief comment on developmental theorists, they claim that fitting information into each stage of life gives greater meaning to personal beliefs and biblical content. But memorization of biblical information and basic belief should not be dismissed.¹⁹ They are cautious about educational and developmental theories. Those theories can overlook the vital aspect of communicating the content of the faith. Authority is not in the individual self. Understanding is not conveyed by drawing out “latent capacities.”²⁰ It must be learned. Parrett and Packer cite the central focus of

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 174.

¹⁸ Gary A. Parrett and S. Steven Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 68-73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰ Ibid., 139.

catechism training is the gospel.²¹ Without this as center, spiritual formation loses its Christian distinctive. They offer four elements of content. The first is the biblical content of the truth of the gospel. Secondly is that belief statements are based on scriptural convictions. Next are the doctrines that are specific to each congregation. Lastly is the commitment to particular denominations.²² Delineating content this way is helpful for comprehending layers of Christian understanding and how they are built. While these authors give a convincing argument for good content of the faith, they are short of process. Even their process is content driven.²³ They focus on biblical and doctrinal understanding, which is essential. But this makes them critical of developmental processes that are not grounded in this way.

Discipleship Perspective: Dallas Willard

Dallas Willard has become a strong voice of discipleship practices for Christian formation. The learning attitude of apprentice to a master teacher is the essential first step.²⁴ Spiritual formation is not mere human effort. Spiritual formation is an inward work of the Spirit.²⁵ It is where all of life is submitted to the leadership of Christ.²⁶

²¹ Ibid., 140.

²² Ibid., 150-155.

²³ Ibid., 169-176.

²⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Recovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins Pub., 1998), 321.

²⁵ Dallas Willard and Paul Cavill, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 22.

²⁶ Ibid., 32.

Disciples initiate practices that allow the Spirit to shape their human spirits to be more like Christ. In order for that to occur, training is needed. Willard is a corrective for the American church culture, which undervalues and miscomprehends the discipleship process. He claims that contemporary Christianity has gotten the gospel wrong. It is to order all of life.²⁷ What is needed is a whole-life discipleship. Young adults are longing for meaning in life and this call to value authentic lived-out faith can be a compelling way for a Christian perspective on meaning. Willard's depth of understanding for the importance of authenticity, an extensive understanding of the gospel, and intentional discipleship paths offer clarity for spiritual formation process.

Willard states that life transformation is the goal but our feelings, thinking, and social practices get in the way.²⁸ What Willard suggests is the need for content, an outline of that content, the relationships that teach and model that content and for spiritual formation to occur. Willard relies on a rational understanding to inculcate faith. He downplays the affections and actions in the world. He discusses the affections, but is suspicious of their influence.²⁹ With young adults immersed in the consumer culture with its therapeutic appeal, Christian leaders must engage the emotions. The importance of our affections will be a vital component of any spiritual formation process. How those affections are shaped will be the primary question. Willard also leans heavily on teaching and practices of the faith, which is a needed exhortation with the diminishing emphasis of these in churches. But in a postmodern context, a process that encourages questioning

²⁷ Willard, *Conspiracy*, 25.

²⁸ Willard, *Renovation*, 90.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 141-156.

would enhance his perspective. The importance of young adults' desire for belonging and inclusion could be missed.

Church Planting Perspective: Dave and Jon Ferguson

Dave and Jon Ferguson began church planting in the Chicago area in 1990. Community Christian Church and the NewThing Network is a multiplication movement that has spread to 150 sites. Their threefold conviction is: 1. Reaching people far from God. 2. Restoring God's dream for the world. 3. Reproducing the mission in others. They tend to appeal to a younger demographic because of the language of risk-taking and goal setting. They begin with mission. This sense of mission is often what is missing in churches and discipleship strategies.³⁰ They share a desire for church planting with other similarly mission-minded churches.³¹

The Fergusons focus on mentoring leaders, starting groups, churches, and church movements. Their strength is that it is simple, reproducible, and effective. Established churches can have two things that weaken their witness. One is not to focus outward. Jon Ferguson stated that their mission is to "reach those far from God." They address the tendency for churches to attract people who are already Christians. The second weakness is to not apprentice people to follow Christ. They begin with the idea of investing in a few people. The apprenticeship model is the beginning of spiritual formation. What is not apparent is how different generations may interact in the apprenticeship model.

³⁰ See Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* pages 97- 104 for a description of this facet.

³¹ The Annual Verge Conference highlights leaders such as David Platt, Alan Hirsch, Mike Breen, Neil Cole, and Francis Chan, see www.vergenetwork.org.

While they focus on discipling a small number of people to begin with, they seem preoccupied with breadth of numbers. The Fergusons begin with a simple discipleship process but they do not unpack the content of discipleship. Recently, Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson have given a fuller theology behind their approach to church multiplication. They state the *missio dei* is the beginning of where church imagination should begin. They further assert how it has drifted from the original missional impetus.³² The Fergusons are representative of missional multiplying Christian communities who take the sentness of the church seriously. They express the action aspect of spiritual formation.

³² Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge: A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle eBook, loc. 457-459.

SECTION 3: THE THESIS

Introduction

Christian spiritual formation is growth into the character and calling of Jesus. Dallas Willard states that Christian spiritual formation is the process of shaping the human spirit to be like Christ.¹ For young adults' spiritual formation, they need the beliefs, practices, and relationships of the church to support and shape that development. Commitment to a lifestyle of faith and belief is the goal. Tom Wright states that the goal, "is the life of fully formed, fully flourishing Christian character."² How that faith develops in young adults is the focus of this paper.³

Emerging adulthood's spiritual formation is a developmental issue. Spiritual growth occurs as one matures in how one understands and lives that faith. Bergler shows that focusing on self-fulfillment hinders a maturing faith.⁴ Attractional efforts to keep youth in church neglected the spiritual development of youth. Prioritizing spiritual formation is a shift from building church attendance to disciple making. Mike Breen simply states, "If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples."⁵ Being intentional about spiritual formation in the

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006), 53.

² N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 31-32.

³ Gordon Fee, "On Getting the Spirit Back Into Spirituality," in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 38.

⁴ Bergler, loc. 2763.

⁵ Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2011), Kindle eBook, loc. 100-101.

church can build young adults in the faith. The goal is to build disciple-making practices into the church that develop a coherent and grounded faith.

James Fowler and Spiritual Formation

Spiritual maturity is a developmental issue. James Fowler's developmental theory offers insight for spiritual maturity. Fowler, as both a theologian and a developmental psychologist, pioneered faith development theory. He combines the study of human life stages and theology using Jean Piaget's structuralism, Erickson's moral development, and the insights of H. Richard Niebuhr's theology of grace. Through these and his own research, he presents a process of faith formation. How one develops spiritually can be better understood through the lens of this theory.

Fowler's faith stage development theory has elements that can be instructive on the spiritual formation for emerging adults in a changing culture. Young adults are developing in their natural maturing process; they are in some ways traveling on the trajectories of their youth. Faith stage theory offers guidance for the process of spiritual formation for lives in a transitional state. This provides a way to examine both the micro level of emerging adults' immediate social context and the wider macro social forces. Fowler outlines three particular contributions of his theory. Faith occurs in the context of relationship, it is a way of knowing, and it is a developmental perspective.⁶

⁶ James W. Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, eds. Craig R. Dykstra and Sharon Daloz Parks (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 19.

1. A Way of Knowing

Spirituality can be a vague term that fits with popular ideas of individualistic human progress. Fowler does not use the word spirituality, but faith development, which is an important distinction. Faith for Fowler is the alignment of one's will or the commitment of one's heart. To believe, in this sense, is "to set the heart upon."⁷ He is not attempting to express the content of any faith. He is not demonstrating how beliefs are transferred, but how people grow to embrace faith over the life cycle.

Fowler defines faith as a search for meaning in life.⁸ Following Niebuhr, he views faith as a human endeavor to construct meaning centered on what is of ultimate value. As opposed to faith being a compartmentalized aspect of one's life, faith is the total orientation of a person in every area of life.⁹ Faith is a way of knowing. It is a total knowing of oneself in one's entire environment.¹⁰ While content of faith is vital, it is also important to understand the process of how that faith is developed.

Each person creates meaning making structures in one's thinking. Maturing in faith is a maturing of one's understanding of meaning.¹¹ Knowing and how we know are foundational for spiritual formation. Faith, for Fowler, means that a person is fully involved in the process of one's own growth.¹² Fowler expresses it in this way:

"Knowing occurs when an active listener interacts with an active world of persons and

⁷ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 12.

⁸ Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," 15.

⁹ Fowler, *Stages*, 14.

¹⁰ Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

objects, meeting its unshaped or unorganized stimuli with the ordering, organizing power of a knower's mind."¹³ In this way, people seek ways of organizing their lives in order to understand their relatedness in the world.

2. The Relational Nature of the Development

Fowler notes the importance of the relational input of others for faith to develop. He states that faith is relational, not propositional.¹⁴ By deemphasizing the content, he is able to focus on the process of developing faith. It depends on another to help it flourish. The shared story of one is related to the other. Meaning is shaped and formation occurs through interpersonal relationships tied to ultimate value.¹⁵

The relationship is a three-way connection. Fowler sees faith development occurring in relation to oneself, others, and the ultimate source of meaning. Faith development involves people in relationship who are connected to "the ultimate" source of meaning.¹⁶ This triangle of faith demonstrates how persons compose meaning for their lives in relation to that shared meaning. (See Figure 1 below) This can be a god or whatever brings supreme meaning in life. This shared meaning of ultimate value is the basis and bond of these relationships. The relational ties between people are mediated by shared loyalties to "centers of supra-ordinate values."¹⁷

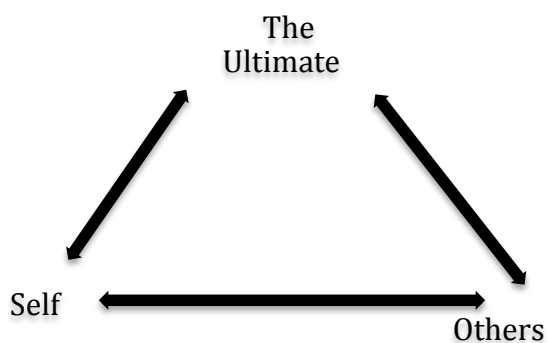
¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ Fowler, *Stages*, 73-74.

¹⁶ James W. Fowler, Sam Keen, and Jerome Berryman, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978), 21.

¹⁷ Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," 17.

Figure 1¹⁸

3. A Developmental Stage Perspective

Fowler's premise is that each person goes through a process that matures him or her in faith. He believes this knowing is sequential. Each stage builds upon the previous stages. Levinson describes it by saying "the life course has a particular character and follows a basic sequence."¹⁹ One has to go through elemental stages before one can progress to another one. A person comprehends her or his faith according to her or his own developmental understanding of faith. Each stage of life has its own characteristics that define it and people in the life cycle progress in a particular order. Faith development is a life-span perspective. Faith stage theory shows how a person potentially progresses as he or she grows in the life cycle. The commitment to faith may stay the same for each stage, but the way of being in relationship to that faith changes.²⁰ Fowler unveils his faith development theory in seven stages:

¹⁸ James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 21.

¹⁹ Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1978), 6.

²⁰ Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," 39.

1. Primal faith.

This stage contains an undifferentiated faith. It occurs before language. It is a stage where the trust versus mistrust stage is developing. The quality of the level of faith depends on the child's attachment to the primary caretakers.²¹ This primal faith emerges from a dependence upon those relationships.²²

2. Intuitive-Projective stage.

This begins at about age 2. They are becoming aware of their environment. Language emerges as means to interact and negotiate relationships. They perceive life primarily through their feelings.²³

3. Mythic-Literal stage

This occurs at about the time children enter school. They may begin to recognize others' perspectives, but their faith relies on the relational connections established primarily through their family.

4. Synthetic-Conventional

This stage typically begins in adolescence.²⁴ The Synthetic-Conventional stage is where a person synthesizes relationships and experiences of one's past with one's present.²⁵ Their thinking enables them to construct the perspectives of others and how they relate to themselves. It is synthetic as they are working to integrate their

²¹ Fowler, *Stages*, 119-121.

²² James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁴ Fowler, *Stages*, 172.

²⁵ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 58-62.

faith into a coherent unity.²⁶ In this stage, a person is synthesizing one's beliefs, morals, and convictions developed through relationships. It is conventional in that one's faith is derived from others, but not yet a faith of one's own.²⁷

5. Individuative-Reflective.

This stage usually occurs in young adulthood. The move to an Individuative-Reflective stage is where one is able to separate oneself from others. In this stage, there is a shift in the "grounding and orientation" of oneself.²⁸ A person's faith is shifting from one derived from others to one that differentiates oneself from the roles and relationships that have been given. Fowler says there has to emerge the ability to "self-authorize."²⁹ By this he means that she or he is able to objectively examine one's belief in order to bring a sense of coherence. To transition to this stage, one has to be able to construct and define one's own faith.

6. Conjunctive faith

This occurs in midlife. The self is integrated to know oneself and how one is related to one's world.³⁰ One is aware of the tensions in one's life and is able to deal with paradox. Faith is based on convictions, but open to other faith understandings. Fowler states that the "firm boundaries are porous."³¹ A person is able to see things from more than one viewpoint.

²⁶ Ibid., 58-59.

²⁷ Ibid., 60.

²⁸ Ibid., 62.

²⁹ Ibid., 62-63.

³⁰ Ibid., 64.

³¹ Ibid., 65.

7. Universalizing faith

In each stage, people grow in their ability take new perspectives. A universalizing faith creates space for values other than one's own. But this is a larger perspective than stage 6, as one sees the universal human community. People are adept at decentering themselves enough to appreciate and participate with an expanding understanding of others.³² Fowler says it is a rare person who attains this stage.³³

The Faith Stage Process of Emerging Adults

The development of young adults proceeds from what Fowler calls a Synthetic-Conventional faith of adolescence to an emerging Individuative-Reflective stage.³⁴ The Individuative-Reflective stage is a shift from assumed convictions given by one's environment to establish meaning for oneself. It involves being able to objectify oneself with one's given faith and critically make choices of what one believes. Social embeddedness in relationships creates a tension as young adults attempt to differentiate themselves from those relationships to form a new life for themselves.³⁵ This tension forces disequilibrium in an individual which he or she seeks to resolve.

For a person to move to this stage, there has to be an interruption of the dependence of assumed authority.³⁶ A person distances themselves from previously

³² Ibid., 68-69.

³³ Fowler, *Stages*, 200.

³⁴ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 57-64.

³⁵ Charles Bruning, "The Hypothesis Paper," in *Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle* ed. Kenneth Stokes (New York: W H Sadlier, 1982), 31.

³⁶ Fowler, *Stages*, 179.

unexamined values. She or he must shift to authority that is within oneself. To establish a faith of one's own, a person not only begins to shift away from previous loyalties and values, one must continue to reflect and decide which values belong to a new emerging identity. Another way to state this is that a person is shifting from a given faith to an owned faith.³⁷ The faith of one's upbringing is examined. The emerging faith is reconstituted to one that is coherent and integrated into a young adult's life.

Each stage is predicated upon a crisis. A dilemma exists between the identity and understanding of faith of one level and new possibilities for what one believes and could become.³⁸ There is a tension between the expectations of parents and/or other significant caregivers and the emerging young adult's desire for autonomy.³⁹ There is a tension between loyalty to a group and loyalty to one's own developing sense of faith. The strength of this stage is the ability to reflect on one's identity and one's outlook.⁴⁰ For young adults as they transition in life, their identity is being reformed. Fowler contends that this sense of identity must be strong enough so that people can make commitments.⁴¹ The goal is that in the midst of the fluidity of that identity, young adults can be secure enough and wise enough to make commitments in relationships, work, church, and their community. Fowler states that "The movement ... to an Individuative-Reflective faith is particularly critical for it is in this transition that the late adolescent or adult must begin to

³⁷ John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 3rd rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 2012), Kindle eBook, loc. 679-680.

³⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 48.

³⁹ Fowler, *Stages*, 158.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

take seriously the burden or responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes.”⁴² The adolescent in the synthetic-individuative stage adheres to values that are given to him. They are mediated by others.⁴³ Young adults are moving to a faith that they own, though that faith may not yet be fully formed. The crisis is between reflection on their faith versus strong but unexamined feelings and beliefs.⁴⁴

A person can emerge from that crisis with a stronger unified sense of self and an ability to establish and remain faithful to one’s values.⁴⁵ Fowler observes that each stage contains its own transformations by how it is structured.⁴⁶ Fowler asserts that each level of development requires “a different range of interactions and experiences” for growth to occur.⁴⁷ Levinson observes that this transition can be a painful process, but also it can be an opportunity for positive change.⁴⁸ The crisis creates a space, an opportunity, for a person to move to a higher understanding of faith. Young adults face the task of “creating a life structure for the next developmental era.”⁴⁹ The perception widens to embrace new ways of viewing oneself, evolving relationship connections, and the influence of the wider world in which he or she is entrenched. For emerging adulthood, the shifting to the individuative-reflective stage is a shift in the grounding of faith. The pre-reflective faith

⁴² Ibid., 182.

⁴³ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁵ Erikson, 91-92.

⁴⁶ Fowler, *Stages*, 243-245.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁸ Levinson, 33.

⁴⁹ Fowler, *Stages*, 11.

that one receives shifts to a faith that one embraces. Assumed conceptions of faith are no longer adequate for a maturing faith. In order for faith to grow, it must be incorporated as one's own.⁵⁰

The Strengths of Fowler's Faith Development Theory

Fowler's theory gives insight into the spiritual maturity process for young adults. Here I cite broad categories for how faith development theory strengthens that formation.⁵¹ Each one intersects with the other. They are:

Relational Engagement

Fowler's stages of faith reveal the relational nature of spiritual formation. Faith is relational; it depends on another to develop. Knowing is embedded in relationship. It is a knowing that encompassed all of life. Faith or religious commitments are made because of the value of the relationships that are engendered. Faith relationships are covenantal. He asserts that trusting relationships are the basis of that development.⁵² They depend on mutual trust and commitment. He states, "Faith implies trust in another, reliance upon another, a counting upon or dependence upon another."⁵³ One trusts in what is being

⁵⁰ Westerhoff, loc. 679-680.

⁵¹ Sharon Parks, "Faith Development in a Changing World," in *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development: A Reader*, eds. Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (Leominster, England: Gracewing: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992), 94-95.

⁵² James W. Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, 16.

related.⁵⁴ For, “in each of the roles we play, in each of the significant relationships we have with others, in each institution of which we are a part, we are linked to others in shared trusts and loyalties to centers of values and power.”⁵⁵ In this way, the content and the process are brought together as one. This development process respects the individual as their lives take shape and interpret their faith. It gives a lens to understanding the transitions in people’s lives.⁵⁶ This can create openness in discussing matters of faith. Openness is about exposing who you are, how you function, and what you offer in ways that allow input from people.⁵⁷

A Maturing Faith

For Christians, maturity has been part of its vocabulary since its inception. The apostle Paul taught that maturing in faith is to be the goal of every Christian.⁵⁸ Faith development theory demonstrates that faith matures as one transitions from one stage to another. Fowler contends that the transition from one stage to another requires that a person to reorient one’s faith.⁵⁹ A person accommodates change by constructing new patterns of knowing and valuing. This gives a person a new capacity to deal with the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16-17.

⁵⁵ Fowler, *Stages*, 19.

⁵⁶ William O. Avery, “A Lutheran Examines James W. Fowler,” *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development: A Reader* (Leominster, England: Gracewing: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992), 130.

⁵⁷ Charlene Li, *Open Leadership: How Social Technology Can Transform How You Lead* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 21-33.

⁵⁸ Hebrews 6:1.

⁵⁹ Fowler, “Faith and the Structuring of Meaning,” 52.

issues of life.⁶⁰ What he advocates for is to bring subconscious factors into the forefront. In order to move to an individuative-reflective faith, one has to evaluate the previously tacit system of beliefs.⁶¹ Fowler states that at the heart of the individuative-reflective stage there must be a third-person perspective taking. Then what was previously constituted by rules and relationships is questioned apart from those previous defining connections. Being able to differentiate one's self means owning one's faith and being able to reflect on the cultural influences that have shaped that faith.

Maturity involves shifting from being inward-focused to a more responsible outward faith.⁶² A mature faith is able to interact with people's values other than one's own. As Fowler declares, "each successive stage of faith marks a widening in social perspective taking."⁶³ Fowler describes what he calls the dynamics of faith in the transitions and transformations of faith. Each faith stage is a way of finding and giving meaning to life. Each stage is an expanding ability to respond graciously in a world of contraction and paradox. There's a particular view of the world a person takes as he or she develops.⁶⁴ A person's locus of authority is more established and the point of reference from which he or she to make decisions changes. Judgments as one develops are more inclusive, less judgmental, and able to reflect and include those with whom one differs.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁶¹ Ibid., 62.

⁶² Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 67-68.

⁶³ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Postmodern Engagement

Young adults' lives are not a problem separated from the influences of the culture that surrounds them. They are part of a larger postmodern world that both they and those of the church are embedded in. The problems of young adulthood are shaped by the society in which they live. Fowler's theory presents a way to hold to Christian faith commitment while being open to converse in a pluralistic world.⁶⁵ William Avery asserts that it offers an "interpretive framework for understanding religious and interpersonal interaction."⁶⁶ Both personal development and the developing society affect spiritual development. They work together, for spiritual formation does not occur in a vacuum. Although young adult challenges are unique to them, they are part of a much larger shift happening in society that has caused and continually contributes to the nature of their transitions and the ambiguous world they are embedded within.

Fowler sees parallels between the transition from the synthetic-conventional stage to the individuative-reflective stage of life and the postmodern life cycle.⁶⁷ He sees that the transitions in people's personal lives in the life cycle correlate to what happens in the cultural transition from modernity to postmodernity. Modernity's reliance on certainty and progress is challenged by postmodernity. Fowler states that, "Structurally this move shows parallels with the enlightenment's critical dismantling of received systems in theology, philosophy, and cosmology."⁶⁸ Postmodernity critiqued the assurance of

⁶⁵ James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church*. 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), xiv.

⁶⁶ Avery, "A Lutheran Examines James W. Fowler," 131.

⁶⁷ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 147.

reason, the idea that knowledge could be objective, and confidence in human progress. Fowler sees connections with this and the individuated reflective state of faith.

James K. A. Smith also suggests that learning from postmodern understandings can be a way to engage with the Christian faith. He cites that three foundational thinkers of postmodernity may offer the Church insights for ministry. Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault sought to deconstruct modernity. What is being attacked is Christian theology ingrained in modernity's quest for certainty and power. Derrida's profession of "there is no life outside the text" can be impetus for perceiving the centrality of scripture and derives its self-understanding from it. Lyotard's skepticism over metanarratives can aid us to recover the narrative nature of Christianity disentangled from the narrative of modernity. Foucault's assertion that "power is knowledge" may help us see how cultural forces have shaped our life together. Then we offer the world an alternative understanding of power and the life-shaping message of the gospel.⁶⁹

Faith development theory creates ways to speak about belief in a pluralistic society without giving up a person's specific religious identity. It sees that a person's faith convictions can change and still keep the integrity of his or her beliefs. It demonstrates that our religious beliefs are socially as well as historically formed. It is a relationship that a person has within his or her evolving self, the influence of one's social world, and the wider society. Fowler relates that, for postmodernity, everything is process everything is relative to each other. He calls this "the ecological interdependence of all

⁶⁸ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, loc. 245-250.

systems.”⁷⁰ Fowler observes that the later stages of faith progress to a greater understanding and engagement in a postmodern culture.⁷¹ Two reactions to Fowler are similar to the way people engage the culture. Either it is applauded for its inclusive and evolutionary ideology or it is resisted as threatening to an already staid understanding of faith. The former embraces relativism, thereby relegating faith to a private and subjective reality; the latter becomes a closed system that is not open for critique or engagement. Reinhold Niebuhr declares that the “danger of religion and any branch of sciences is that they become closed systems without being open to critique.”⁷² One perception can become a dialogue with no end, no clear commitment in mind. The other is a monologue, where the only conversation is to declare what one knows and not see how one has come to know it. Theology needs to develop a public language in order to participate in a postmodern and pluralistic world in which we live.⁷³ What is notable and even vital for emerging young adults is to have the expressions of faith in a larger framework. It means to have discussions about the distinctive Christian message that engage those with an undeveloped or alternative faith.

⁷⁰ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 158.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷² James H. Hutchingson, *Public Religion and the Natural Sciences: The Range of Engagement* (Harcourt Brace College Publishers, Orlando, FL, 1993), 51.

⁷³ Parks, “Faith Development in a Changing World,” 92.

Objections to Fowler

I. A Universal Faith

The biggest objection to Fowler's faith stage development theory is that it has made faith a generic term, which is not attached to any belief system. His universal definition of faith as seeking meaning is critiqued for being an individualized approach apart from any faith tradition.⁷⁴ Osmer discerns the greatest weakness in stage theory is the object of that faith is left unclear. For him, the Christian faith has an object of its faith.⁷⁵

Dykstra contends that a person's faith is not generic but specially oriented to God who shapes beliefs. It is a response to God's redemptive activity.⁷⁶ To universalize faith leaves it stripped of content and the ability for human transformation. He states, "participation in the redemptive activity of God is not so much a matter of making sense out of our existence as it is a *modification* of our existence."⁷⁷ Faith is not a way of creating meaning; rather, it's a way of relating to God. We need to know who God is and what he's doing so we can respond to it.⁷⁸ Development theory shows how appropriating

⁷⁴ Karl Nipkow, "Stage Theory as a Challenge to Religious Education and Practical Theology," in *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implication for Church, Education and Society*, eds. James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 83-84.

⁷⁵ Richard R. Osmer, "James Fowler and the Reformed Tradition: an Exercise in Theological Reflection in Religious Education," in *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development: A Reader*, eds. Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (Leominster, England: Gracewing: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992), 135ff.

⁷⁶ Craig R. Dykstra in "What is Faith?: An Experiment in the Hypothetical Mode," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, eds. Craig R. Dykstra and Sharon Daloz Parks (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 60.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

meaning in life transitions matures faith. It can direct our attention to capacities for spiritual formation. Fowler puts his theory in tandem with Christian content. What Dykstra believes is that this cannot be done, for faith has a specific object and a particular way of life that distinguishes itself from other faith expressions.

The tension between Dykstra's approach and Fowler's is that Dykstra focuses on a specific Christian perspective. He sites that faith requires a particular kind of knowledge that is different than the approach of faith as seeking meaning. Fowler's definition of faith is a universal faith. Fowler has no intention of composing faith only as a Christian category. Though informed by his Christian theology, his interest is in how faith develops as it correlates to human development. This developmental process is not meant to replace the content of faith but to work alongside it.⁷⁹ Fowler distinguishes faith from belief. Belief is the ability to understand the concepts of faith as they relate to one's personal life. Faith is the dedication to the ultimate meaning of what those concepts relate.⁸⁰

2. *Reliance on Cognitive Ability*

Fowler is critiqued that his theory is weighted too heavily on cognitive understanding. Dykstra contends that spiritual formation is not cognitive alone. He cites that it also contains "prereflective and preconscious" elements.⁸¹ Mike Breen also claims knowledge-based spiritual formation as inadequate. He asserts, "Why are we assuming

⁷⁹ Fowler, *Becoming Christian*, 84-95.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸¹ Craig Dykstra, "What is Faith: An Experiment in the Hypothetical Mode," 58.

that simply by giving people information (pray, read the Bible, read doctrinal statements, be a part of a small group) they actually know how to do it or can figure it out by themselves?”⁸² Sharon Parks too notes that Fowler’s theory is critiqued for reliance on rational thought. His theory depends too much on Piaget’s understanding of cognitive development. Parks contends that knowing what is of ultimate meaning and being committed to that “value of ultimate meaning” is not the same thing.⁸³ For Fowler, what cognitive understanding does show is that in each developmental stage, how a person perceives his or her beliefs changes. Missing is the work of God in the individual. As Dykstra points out, faith is more than discovering meaning in life. It is participating in God’s transformational activity in our lives.

3. Growth in Faith Is Not Necessarily Progressive

Dykstra finds Fowler’s stage development theory centered on human achievement of growth in human “capacities” to deal with one’s environment.⁸⁴ For him, Fowler’s stage theory implies that there is a movement and growth that is irreversible and does not regress.⁸⁵ Dykstra states that just because faith undergoes change doesn’t mean it develops. Development theory proposes that it takes place in an ordered progression. Faith development doesn’t necessarily progress in the same way.⁸⁶ As Sharon Parks

⁸² Breen and Cockram, *Building a Discipleship Culture*, loc. 371-372.

⁸³ Sharon Parks, “Imagination and Spirit in Faith Development: A Way Past the Structure- Content Dichotomy,” *Faith Development and Fowler*, 98.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

shows, faith development “like all developmental theories has a tendency to focus on structures and stages rather than on the process that gives rise to those stages.”⁸⁷ What Parks argues is that Fowler depends too much on static structuring and not enough on the fluid movement of the development process.

Mark Cannister as well argues that faith development is fluid. Using Marcia’s four identity statuses, he interprets faith development as a process that may progress and regress. They are:

1. Diffusion – People in this status have not made any identity or faith commitments.⁸⁸
2. Foreclosure – People conform to the expectations of others without exploring identity or faith. They are “uncritically adopted.”⁸⁹
3. Moratorium – There is a wrestling with identity and one’s faith that is part of it. A person is questioning the given faith emerging from foreclosure. This is a time of active reflection on faith and values. One actively is exploring faith but has not made a decision to commitment.
4. Achievement – People in this stage make commitment to their values and faith. Young adults may be moving from a state of “Foreclosure” where beliefs are indoctrinated to one of “Moratorium” where one becomes aware of other beliefs and wrestles with allegiance to them.⁹⁰ For Fowler, this is a time out from

⁸⁷ Parks, *Faith Development and Fowler*, 138.

⁸⁸ Cannister, *Teenagers Matter*, 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹⁰ Jane Kroger, Monica Martinussen, and James E. Marcia, “Identity Status Change During Adolescence and Young Adulthood: A Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Adolescence* 33, no.5 (October 2010):

previous commitments to a time of reevaluation.⁹¹ But they also may regress into a perfective status when the pressures of transition or questioning are resolved. While Fowler's stages are achieved and then do not fluctuate, Marcia views faith development as not necessarily a linear process. People can move up and down the status ladder.⁹² People may advance to achievement for a while, but a new life experience may cause them to question and regress into moratorium. This process may or may not be related to age categories. Partly this is dependent on a person's environment that supports him or her in his or her transitional state.⁹³ The congregation contains environmental factors that help or hinder faith. As young adolescents and emerging adults assert their individuality and identity, they often question faith. Once they resolve their questions, they may advance in faith development or they may return to previous stages.⁹⁴ For example, a young adult may struggle with the idea of suffering in the world. A leader may give them a simplistic answer instead of guiding the young adult to process it for themselves. Instead of wrestling with the issue and being perhaps moved by compassion, he or she can unreflectively satisfy the idea of suffering as a curiosity instead of a real-world issue.

683-698, accessed December 11, 2013,
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014019710900147X>.

⁹¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 43.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹⁴ Mark Cannister, "Moratorium Matters".

Conclusions to Objections

Each of these authors exposes weaknesses in Fowler's theory. Fowler explores these critiques in later publications.⁹⁵ They also enhance his theory. Human development theory alone is not adequate for spiritual formation. Stages of faith theory helps us understand maturity in appropriating meaning. It can direct our attention to capacities for spiritual formation. It is a tool for understanding how people develop and change. As a tool, faith development theory is helpful for understanding broad changes both in individual lives and in the wider postmodern culture. It is a tool to help diagnose and comprehend how spiritual development occurs. But the danger is that the tool can become a means to its own end. Faith stage theory is a tool, but it is only a tool.⁹⁶ Meaning in life is what each person desires. What Dykstra and Willard show is that it is not an end in itself. Its end is found in God. Even Fowler sees it as a supportive structure alone. He claims that it is "merely scaffolding."⁹⁷ Also, although Fowler continually evolves in this theory and application, he remains steadfast in his belief that stage theory happens in sequential patterns. The process that moves a person from one stage to another includes but is not limited to a developmental understanding. Fowler, by endeavoring to speak about faith in a pluralist culture, speaks from a framework of

⁹⁵ See James Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium," *Religious Education* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 405-421, accessed June 28, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00344080490513036>.

⁹⁶ Jamieson finds Fowler helpful in the tension church leavers have with reconciling their faith to church practices. But he also notes the limitations of this theory. He calls it a "bare-bones map". It is helpful but limited. It does not carry the authority of the content of Christian faith. Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002), p.110.

⁹⁷ Fowler, *Stages*, 293.

modernity. The very notion of stages infers a progressive human ability to apprehend faith. As some of Fowler's critics argue, the modern emphasis on cognitive understanding and developmental stages of his theory show weaknesses that postmodernity would refute. What Fowler does well is to call attention to the maturing of faith separated from beliefs and at the same time admitting that content of faith is equally valid for spiritual formation. What strengthens his theory is that Christian spiritual formation contains both the maturing element and the process of conversion.

Spiritual Formation: Development and Conversion

Developmental Change

There are two kinds of change in the spiritual formation process, developmental change and conversion. Fowler's developmental theory is not a theology. It is lacking in the power of narrative and tradition. In this way, it has no power for transforming human character. What it does present is a way to examine the distortions of the faith. Maturity in faith is a constant decentering from self-groundedness toward living in fidelity with one's ultimate source of meaning.⁹⁸ Structures of faith stages provide a tool for examining sovereign individuals who lack connection and direction.

Structural stages describe the "how" of one's faith. They are not necessarily the contents of one's faith, but a way in which a person processes his or her faith. Faith stage theory explains how a person interprets and lives out his or her faith. Persons compose

⁹⁸ Ibid., 293.

their faith in accordance to the way in which they structure their relation to that faith.⁹⁹ For instance, ethical choices can be made in prereflective stages by accommodating the assumed values of others. A person composes meaning by referring to their parents' ideals or the values of one's peer group. A person in the synthetic-reflective stage is able to distance oneself from these influences and make choices of "one's own." But no one is able to distance oneself enough or be objective enough to completely achieve this perspective. It takes a community of relationships to create environments where the Spirit of God changes a person's orientation. This process is called conversion.

Conversion

Fowler's stage theory is focused on developmental faith, but he believes conversion is essential as well. He clarifies that "The Christian approach to the transformation from self-groundedness to vocational existence involves, then, the affirmation of *both* development and conversion."¹⁰⁰ Conversion is the reorienting of one's life purpose to the purposes of God. A person's identity shifts from groundedness in one's self to the Gospel story of God's redemptive love.¹⁰¹ Dallas Willard explains that spiritual transformation is a "human problem without a human solution."¹⁰² The goal for spiritual formation of emerging adults is the character and calling of Jesus. Willard states that Christian spiritual formation is the process of shaping the human spirit to be like

⁹⁹ Ibid., 249.

¹⁰⁰ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 141.

¹⁰¹ Jamieson notes they are both are integral to spiritual formation. See Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, p. 109.

¹⁰² Willard, *The Great Omission*, 20.

Christ.¹⁰³ For young adults' spiritual formation, they need the beliefs, practices, and relationships of the church to hold them. How these relate to personal identity, fulfillment, and meaning in life is crucial. Commitment to a lifestyle of faith and belief is the goal.

Westerhoff agrees that both a developmental faith and conversion is necessary for Christian spiritual formation. For him, conversion is more often a process that occurs in Christian community than an individual once and for all decision. Regardless of how conversion occurs, the result is a shift from an indifferent faith to one that is wholly embraced.¹⁰⁴ Westerhoff adds that,

Conversion is more typically a process by which persons are nurtured in a community's faith (the religion of the heart), go through the despair of doubt and the intellectual quest for understanding (the religion of the head), and at last, in late adolescence or early adulthood, experience illumination, certainty, and identity. In retrospect, most persons who achieve this mature conversion identify their early faith as inadequate and their earlier experiences of emotional conversion into the community's beliefs, attitudes, and values as insignificant.¹⁰⁵

The gospel of Jesus Christ summons a person to change. The faith to which Jesus called people was a trusting and obedient devotion to him and his mission. Faith stages provide a lens for examining the individualistic notion that we are self-created. Committing to one's ultimate source of meaning and purpose matters. However, it is faith in Jesus that gives people power to live out their faith. For Christians, the distinct gospel message of Jesus provides the power to live out one's purpose. Without that, stage theory would have no real grounding ability.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰⁴ Westerhoff, loc. 689- 691.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., loc. 682-688.

¹⁰⁶ Fowler, *Stages*, 293.

Just as postmodernity deconstructs notions of certainty, progress, and any metanarrative to define life, Jesus also challenged people's perspectives of reality. Characteristics that capitulated to the culture of power and prestige were challenged. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. Otherwise my disciples would fight."¹⁰⁷ Conversion shifts our understanding, affections, and character.¹⁰⁸ This change deconstructs any previous notion of self-sufficiency and self-groundedness.

Spiritual formation for young adults involves not only listening and respecting their perspective; it confronts the prevalent ideology that we are self-made. It is a freedom from the individualistic approach of managing life.¹⁰⁹ It alters a person's beliefs and behaviors. Fowler states that,

*Conversion is a significant recentering of one's previous conscious and unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adaption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action. (Italics in original)*¹¹⁰

The conversion process reveals people as partners with Christ. Fowler describes this as a deep connection with Christ. He states that conversion is "...having an attachment to the passion of Jesus the Christ – a loving, committed, and ready-to-suffer passion for the in-breaking commonwealth of love."¹¹¹

Times of uncertainty and crisis can expose the weaknesses of emerging adults' spiritual condition. When young adults go through the crisis of transition, this can be an

¹⁰⁷ John 18:36.

¹⁰⁸ James Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 140.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹¹⁰ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 281-282.

¹¹¹ Fowler, *Faith Development*, 140.

opportunity for change. The conversion experience often begins with an awareness of one's own internal spiritual disequilibrium. James Loder shows that a person who experiences uncomfortable and disturbing circumstances seeks resolve. The desire for resolution is an opportunity for change. Loder remarks, "The more one cares about the conflict the more powerful will be the knowing event."¹¹² Without this desire, power for change is difficult. Sharon Parks claims that young adults' response to transitions create conflict that either can result in "overdistancing or overwhelming anxiety."¹¹³

Overdistancing occurs when one alienates oneself from the issues at hand. It can lead to blame and aggression toward the perceived source of the crisis. Overwhelming anxiety can stall growth by avoiding the difficult dimensions of faith. But, as Westerhoff asserts, this time of questioning can lead emerging adults to find a faith of one's own. Loder claims that a transition to an owned faith requires a time of doubt.¹¹⁴ It is a time of disequilibrium where a person is confused and consciously seeks solutions. It is a time of distancing in order to reflect and formulate possible ways to interpret the issue. Here assumptions and the values behind them are examined.

This leads a person for a time of reflection Loder calls "scanning." This is what Fowler calls a third-person perspective taking. It is a time of disequilibrium where a person is confused and consciously seeks solutions. It is a time of distancing in order to reflect and formulate possible ways to interpret the issue. Here assumptions and the values behind them are examined.

¹¹² James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 31.

¹¹³ Parks, *The Critical Years*, 119.

¹¹⁴ Loder, 32.

When young adults begin to shift into the individuative-reflective stage, they are searching for faith that distances themselves from their given faith and working to synthesize their own faith. Loder calls this a time for insight. This is a period of searching that allows for insight to develop. Meaning is constituted by a pattern of connections.¹¹⁵ In a religious experience, this is a moment of revelation.¹¹⁶ This turning point transforms perceptions.¹¹⁷ Westerhoff asserts that this searching faith is a time of experimenting. He states, “Searching faith requires that we explore alternatives to our earlier understandings and ways, for people need to test their own tradition by learning about others. It is only then that they are able to reach convictions which are truly their own.”¹¹⁸

Conversion is a reordering of one’s foundational understandings. Instead of self-groundedness, a person is grounded in the truths of the Gospel. Christian spiritual formation has a goal. It is commitment to Christ. It occurs when one owns one’s faith. For Loder, this is a release of the constricted pressure of moving from a conventional faith (Fowler’s fourth stage) to a faith one has “self-authorized” (Fowler’s fifth stage). Westerhoff calls a given faith an “affiliative faith.” An affiliative faith is one nurtured by parents and Christian community. The process of developing a faith of one’s own moves from an affiliative to a searching faith and then to an owned faith. Westerhoff claims, “This movement from experienced and affiliative faith through searching faith to owned faith is what historically has been called conversion.”¹¹⁹ An owned faith is a lived faith.

¹¹⁵ Parks, *The Critical Years*, 123-124.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹⁷ Loder, 33.

¹¹⁸ Westerhoff, loc. 1530-1532.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, loc. 1543-1544.

This involves the totality of young adults' lives. Conversion is a holistic process that engages the mind, the emotions and actions.

Holistic Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation involves cognitive understanding, a passion for God, and action as part of God's mission. All three constitute what is necessary for spiritual formation, but each on their own is not enough. Modernity's presupposition is that spiritual growth is reliant mainly on cognitive understanding. The ability to articulate one's faith is only one aspect of spiritual maturity. Emotional and behavioral maturity is involved as well.¹²⁰ A cognitive understanding of beliefs alone can be disconnected to how one actually lives. Emotional spirituality alone can focus primarily on therapeutic self-fulfillment. Action alone leaves character formation untouched. Christian spiritual formation is holistic, transforming the totality of persons into the character of Christ. The change requires a holistic reorientation.¹²¹ In order for Christian leaders to facilitate spiritual formation, three things need to occur.¹²² A leader has to engage the head, the heart, and the hands.

Chip Heath and Dan Heath, in their book *Made to Stick*, show that change does not happen without engaging all three; our thought processes that make sense of life, our emotional makeup that stirs up human desires, and actions. They state that knowledge

¹²⁰ Harkness, 131.

¹²¹ Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross. *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 181.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 180-181.

does not change behavior. People must be engaged in multiple ways to change their behavior.¹²³ To prove this, they give an example of how nutrition could be improved in an impoverished village. They gathered examples of healthy children within the village and made a case from within their own people of how to improve nutrition. Then they were able to give evidence for how healthy eating could be done. They stirred up emotion for parents' desire for their children's health by showing examples of healthy children who ate differently, which appealed to action by demonstrating in clear easy methods how this could be done.¹²⁴ These three are part of what is needed for young adult spiritual formation as well. By immersing oneself in the world of emerging adults and engaging them on cognitive, affective, and active levels, change in their spiritual lives occurs as well.

Engaging the Mind

Engaging the mind is vital for spiritual formation.¹²⁵ Without it, spiritual formation has no shape. Christian Smith posits that there is a crisis in our contemporary cultural of knowledge and value.¹²⁶ Young adults have not been equipped with the intellectual and moral tools to know what to do with the relativity of our culture. They

¹²³ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2007), 30.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-31.

¹²⁵ Packer and Parrett, 70.

¹²⁶ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 292.

simply believe whatever subjectively feels right to them. Smith claims that deconstructive postmodernism has taught to reduce knowledge to arbitrary value claims.¹²⁷

Fowler includes his key understandings of the content of faith in his work. He says that faith must be lived in congruence with the Christian message.¹²⁸ The content and focus of faith is on God and his activity, not only on human development. In order to grow in one's faith, a fuller understanding is needed. The contents are the various beliefs of a specific faith tradition. The structure is how one goes about shaping one's life.¹²⁹ It is the way one interprets the symbols and meanings of one's faith and how one responds to them.¹³⁰

Even though Fowler divides the content of faith from the structures of faith, he in no way elevates his theory of faith development above the content of the faith found in the symbols and beliefs of any particular religion.¹³¹ He admits he has not taken into account the relationship between them. Both the changes of stages of faith and the changes of conversion to faith have life-shaping ability. For young adults to stay optimistic about the future, they need to become aware of the limits of their ability to construct their identity and their relationships with others.¹³² For Christian faith to form, an understanding of beliefs is vital. Reflective thinking is important for young adults as

¹²⁷ Ibid., 293.

¹²⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 82-84.

¹²⁹ Fowler, *Stage of Faith*, 249.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 249-251.

¹³¹ Ibid., 273.

¹³² Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 63.

they transition in life. The content of Christian faith is the ground upon which that reflection can take place.

Engaging the Emotions

The highly charged therapeutic nature of the culture is strong. Along with ambiguous belief systems, young adults are ill-equipped to navigate it in healthy ways.¹³³ What is equally true is that many of the faith communities they come from are part of this reality as well. Desires are shaped by elevating personal choice above any faith convictions.

Fowler acknowledges the emotional aspect of spiritual formation. What he does not do is fall prey to the emotionalism and therapeutic indoctrination of our present culture. When he speaks of emotion he means, “emotions in the sense of a deep-going, pervasive, long-lasting set of fundamental dispositions of the heart.”¹³⁴ Willard states that people live from the heart outward.¹³⁵ This orientation of the heart does have an emotional aspect. Fowler presents religious affections as a corrective to narcissistic emotionalism. Gratitude, repentance, joy, and suffering, and love of God and neighbor, are ways to order our desires.¹³⁶ Willard, too, speaks of the power of emotions in

¹³³ Patrick Nullens and Ronald Michener, *The Matrix of Christian Ethics: Integrating Philosophy and Moral Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 50-52.

¹³⁴ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 118.

¹³⁵ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 13.

¹³⁶ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 188-122.

directing people's lives, but is highly suspicious of them. He rightly acknowledges that they need to be ordered.¹³⁷

Fowler, in calling our emotional state as “dispositions of the heart,” is pointing to desires as the character of our hearts.¹³⁸ James K. A. Smith commends that we are not primarily thinking beings, we are not primarily believing beings, we are at the core desiring beings. Our spiritual lives are shaped more by desires than our thinking processes. Our desires are what we love.¹³⁹ Smith suggests, “We are creatures who love first and foremost.”¹⁴⁰ These loves are not the fleeting emotions of an immature therapeutic culture. That we are primarily thinking or believing people fragments us into rationalistic beings. He states that we are “embodied agents of desire” or love.¹⁴¹ Our desire shapes our spiritual lives.¹⁴²

Engaging Action

“Juvenilized” Christians do not only need to understand how spiritual formation happens and articulate their faith, but they need to act on it.¹⁴³ People do need an

¹³⁷ Ibid., 117-119.

¹³⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 118.

¹³⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 52. James Smith also discusses non-cognitive worship practices that shape spirituality. He states that emotions and bodily practices are not supportive to the intellect, but integrally connected. Emotional perceptions are shaped by liturgical habits. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pp. 35-41.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 80.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴² Ibid., 81.

¹⁴³ Bergler, loc. 3148-3149.

intellectually coherent and emotionally engaging faith. But spiritual formation is also about what people do with their lives. While Dallas Willard argues for an inside-out transformation, Alan Hirsch argues for an outside-in change. He states that Hellenistic training was based on knowledge of concepts and ideas. Hebraic understanding is concerned with wisdom that leads to right living. It is reflected practice that embodies spiritual life in all of life.¹⁴⁴ This, Hirsch states, is a shift from thinking ourselves into a new way of acting to acting ourselves into a new way of thinking.¹⁴⁵

Behaviors that become routine and practiced are more likely to be continued in the future. Spiritual formation is a process of being habitualized by disciplines that help facilitate that mission.¹⁴⁶ Habits reinforce beliefs. Christian formation involves spiritual disciplines, or habits, that we place in our lives.¹⁴⁷ The Christian habits such as prayer, reading, scripture, and being involved with the faith community all have implications for the strength of a person's faith.

Christian community is called to be participatory.¹⁴⁸ Christian Smith states that "Intrinsically rewarding activities are more likely to be continued to be pursued and have its messages internalized."¹⁴⁹ But participation goes beyond the church organization. Young adults are looking for ways to participate in the culture around them as well. Fowler's attempt to define a faith that interacts with the culture is a good step forward.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., loc. 2775.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., loc. 2765-2781.

¹⁴⁶ James Davidson Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books: 2000), 226.

¹⁴⁷ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 234-236.

¹⁴⁸ Sarah Groves comment in *You Lost Me*, by David Kinnaman, loc. 3704-3714.

¹⁴⁹ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 241.

But more than conversations about faith, emerging adults are looking for a way to express that faith. Kinnaman's research shows that emerging adults believe that personal involvement in a Christian community is optional.¹⁵⁰ He notes that there is a disconnect between their vocation and their experience at church. He states that, "Their Christian background has not prepared them to live and work effectively in society."¹⁵¹

Here is where Fowler's perspective on vocation is helpful. To enlarge the vision of calling is to embrace God's purposes beyond the place where Christians gather. Emerging adults have an interest in involvement in culture, not a withdrawal. In order to keep their involvement in church, what is important to them needs to be addressed. Kinnaman continues, "The Christianity they have learned does not meaningfully speak to the fields of fashion, finance, medicine, science, or media to which they are drawn".¹⁵² Bergler cautions that the idealism of youth alone will not propel them into action. Their social vision can be limited to very self-serving ways. Christian vocational understanding can shape emerging adults' desire to act in meaningful ways.

Vocation as a Means for Spiritual Formation

To live vocationally is to actively live out a particular calling in life. The transitions into adulthood are a great concern for emerging adults. For them, calling is a vision of themselves into the future.¹⁵³ To challenge young adults for vocation is to

¹⁵⁰ Kinnaman, loc. 977-979.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., loc. 1173-1175.

¹⁵² Ibid., loc. 1175-1176.

¹⁵³ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 142.

challenge for a countercultural vision.¹⁵⁴ Young adults are seeking to become financially independent and establish their careers. Understanding Christian vocation can open them up to a larger process than career aspirations. Fowler defines vocation as “the response that a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling to partnership.”¹⁵⁵ He confronts the individualism that can be engrained in the notion of personal vocation.¹⁵⁶ Christian vocation affirms the uniqueness of an individual and also that each person has a personal destiny that is subsumed to God’s calling. It is a call to live out their lives in congruence with God’s mission for them.¹⁵⁷ Because career development is such a big part of emerging adults’ development and focus, understanding vocation from a Christian perspective helps reframe it as a spiritual formation process. When a person participates in God’s mission, he or she becomes part of God’s intended future for the world.¹⁵⁸ It is the response to the invitation of God to partner with him.

If calling is to partnership with God, then vocation moves us beyond creating wealth or financial stability. This is a huge challenge for young adults because of the need to establish themselves and to be able to be financially independent. To understand Christian calling can free them from the anxiety to compete and pursue one’s particular vocation with abilities specific to oneself.¹⁵⁹ Vocation interacts with the larger historical

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 95.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 97-105.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 140.

¹⁵⁸ JR. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), Kindle eBook, loc. 321-323.

¹⁵⁹ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 103.

story of God's action in the world. One's sense of calling drives meaning from this story. It interprets the human condition in light of that story. Fowler derives his theological understanding from Richard Niebuhr.¹⁶⁰ Fowler unpacks that understanding of vocation derived from three metaphors for God. It is an interaction with the culture for the purpose of transforming it.¹⁶¹

1. God as Creator

All that exists originates from God.¹⁶² This is an ongoing interaction between God and his creation. This acknowledges that creation is to be respected and preserved. It is a constant concern that some conservatives have tried to ignore or explain away. To respect scientific inquiry and discovery in creation is a vital concern for young adults. To frame this in light of the Christian calling to care and preserve the earth gives this a theological grounding.

2. God's Work of Governor

God continually works for the ordering of human life. Niebuhr states that God provides a "structure that intends righteousness in the processes of human history."¹⁶³ Social justice is at the heart of this premise. Niebuhr states that injustice structured in society is self-destructive. God has structured society to work for the benefit of humanity.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹⁶¹ Merton P. Strommen and Dick Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona, MI: St. Mary's Press/Christian Brothers Publications, 2000), 274-275.

¹⁶² Ibid., 86.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 87.

Eventually, all evil regimes will crumble when God's governance is completed. God's goal for creation is to order it in accordance with his will. This transcends personal meaning, but transforms it to what Fowler describes as relating to "the Ultimate." Personal relationships take on new meaning as they mutually seek the other not only between themselves, but with the mutual goal of communion with the God who orders all things. This ordering is resisted in a culture of choice rooted in individualism. But true meaning is never personal alone. Meaning is found in the bonds of relationship that tie us together, that generate commitments for mutual care for each other and the ordering of our lives to God.

3. God as Redeemer

God is involved with the "fallen" nature of this world. His nature is to love and to redeem all that is not love. He works "to mitigate and overcome the consequences of our misused freedom."¹⁶⁴ He works to restore the balance of life. God's ultimate redeeming act is God's initiative in sending Christ. As Christ poured out life for the sake of humanity, so we pour out our lives for the sake of another.¹⁶⁵

What Fowler states is that each of these metaphors is relational and do not present God separate from "his relatedness to creation and humanity."¹⁶⁶ Because of this, God's desire is for humanity to partner with him as creator, governor, and redeemer.¹⁶⁷ These

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 89-92.

metaphors about God speak of vocation as a partnership with him. Created in the divine image, we are to reflect him in our callings. Vocation is a call to find meaning and purpose in our work. Christian calling proceeds from the purposes of God shown in these metaphors.

While young adults are asking identity questions and seeking intimacy, understanding and cooperating with the divine vocation resolves those questions. A sense of mission is what captives the imagination for spiritual formation. Fowler submits that there is a movement from asking personal identity questions such as “Who am I?” and “Where am I going” to “Whose am I?” or “Who am I in relation to God?” as creator, governor, and redeemer.¹⁶⁸ Human purpose and meaning are found in the purposes of God. These purposes are the Gospel message worked out in human lives. Christ calls people to reorient their lives around him as his mission.

Christian calling occurs through the church, a community of believers whose ultimate source of meaning is found in Christ. Westerhoff comments that “Christ calls his church, however, to be a community of change, to act with God in transforming the world into the community of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”¹⁶⁹ The process of spiritual formation needs a community to initiate, work with people in transition, and equip them in their newly owned faith. Westerhoff speaks of an environment where that can occur. He states, “To reach owned faith (our full potential) is a long pilgrimage in which we

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶⁹ Westerhoff, loc. 760-761.

need to be provided with an environment and experiences that encourage us to act in ways that assist our expansion of faith.”¹⁷⁰

Parks concurs that a person’s developed faith needs a faith community to confirm a new understanding for it to be complete.¹⁷¹ It is an environment where a person reflects on events that led up to the present moment and gains insight on the way one is to precede. Then a person has embraced a faith of one’s own. An intergenerational church can be where this calling is understood and engaged.

Spiritual Formation in an Intergenerational Christian Community

Spiritual formation is not isolated from Christian community. Part of the disconnect young adults have from involvement in the church is the isolation of the generations. Christian community as the Apostle Paul described is a body where each person regardless of age or experience is integrated into the whole life of the church.¹⁷² For Christian spiritual formation to occur, different generations come together, know each other, and experience life in the body of Christ together.¹⁷³ A person grows as he or she is immersed in a community that embodies a maturing faith themselves. One of Kinnaman’s research conclusions is that “intergenerational relationships in faith communities are crucial.”¹⁷⁴ Christian Smith also says there are two places where

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., loc. 1554-1556.

¹⁷¹ Parks, *The Critical Years*, 127.

¹⁷² See Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 1:23, 4:12-15.

¹⁷³ Ibid. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Kinnaman, locs. 3415 and 3425.

religious socialization occurs. He comments that it occurs in “Individual family households and multigenerational religious congregations.”¹⁷⁵

Intergenerational spiritual formation builds off of Fowler’s focus on mutual relationships centered on ultimate meaning. How those relationships work themselves out in community will aid both the ability of Christian communities to be a compelling place to be involved and one that develops a maturing faith. This offers hopeful aspects in face of the decline of emerging adults’ declining church attendance and religious adherence.

Fowler emphasizes the importance of community in the process of faith formation. He believes intergenerational interactions help foster progressive faith development.¹⁷⁶ While Fowler has been critiqued for relying too much on cognitive understanding, his focus on mutual social connections is instructive for the Christian community. He uses the phrase “church as an ecology of faith nurture” to depict the importance of faith development in community. He sees these communities as places where people interact and even struggle with their faith as they dialogue with scripture and Christian tradition. The goal is to be formed into people that God uses in partnership with him in the world.¹⁷⁷

Westerhoff also advocates for intergenerational relationship development. For Westerhoff, faith development is an “enculturation” process where people of different generations interact and help foster faith.¹⁷⁸ Enculturation is the process of interaction

¹⁷⁵ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 285-286, cited in Allen and Ross, 130.

¹⁷⁶ James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation*, 189-195.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁷⁸ Westerhoff, loc. 1315.

between and among persons of all ages.¹⁷⁹ It is by the interchange of all ages committed to mutually becoming a Gospel-shaped community that spiritual formation occurs. He claims traditional understandings of faith development being instructional and not relational are inadequate for spiritual formation.¹⁸⁰ He focuses on the interactive experiences and environments within which people acquire their understanding of faith. He commends, “To understand faith and its content we need to focus our attention on the experiences of interaction between and among faithing persons in a self-conscious tradition bearing community of faith.”¹⁸¹ Faith involves the process of being socialized into the faith.¹⁸² For young adults, developing a faith that one owns occurs by being a part of the social life of the church both in receiving and giving of its life. The quality of these interactions cultivates environments for people to grow in their faith.¹⁸³ An intergenerational Christian community creates supportive, learning, and missional environments where spiritual formation can occur.

A Supportive Environment

Faith matures as one is engaged in a community that supports its faith. Faith matures not by knowing beliefs alone but in how a person relates to and lives out those beliefs in community. Those relationships depend on the fidelity of the interaction

¹⁷⁹ Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 66.

¹⁸⁰ Westerhoff, loc. 1320-1400.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, loc. 1328-1330.

¹⁸² Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 283ff.

¹⁸³ Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 68.

between people. Fowler calls this a “covenantal pattern of relationship.”¹⁸⁴ The nature of those interactions builds trust between people. The triadic relationship between self, others, and the Ultimate is a commitment to God and mutual trust between people. Trust is established by creating a place where young adults feel free to express their opinions and questions in a nonjudgmental environment. Dunn and Sundene’s vision for young adult spiritual formation also centers on the establishing of relationships that are built on trust with others and Christ action among them.¹⁸⁵ Unsettling questions have not always been welcomed in church. In young adults’ lives, dogmatic answers may actually impede their faith formation.¹⁸⁶ One of the critiques young adults have about church according to David Kinnaman is they feel it is judgmental. He cites they feel church is repressive, exclusive, and leaves no room for questioning.¹⁸⁷ Being fully present to each other for the purpose of mutual exchange will foster that trust. People who wish to help emerging adults listen to what is going on inside of young adults as well as themselves.¹⁸⁸

A supportive environment will require listening well to the next generation. The purpose is understanding each other and reshaping church that encourages it. An intergenerational church can be a place where honest, respectful dialogue occurs. Welcoming relationships with emerging adults’ way of seeing the world in a community

¹⁸⁴ Fowler, *Stages*, 16.

¹⁸⁵ Richard R. Dunn and L. and Jana Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 65.

¹⁸⁶ Cannister, “Moratorium Matters.”

¹⁸⁷ Kinnaman, loc. 1447-1465.

¹⁸⁸ Dunn and Sundene, 57.

of faith opens an opportunity for spiritual formation not only for them, but for other generations as well. Harkness affirms that

Growth in faith will be enhanced as people draw from the wealth of perspectives on these common concerns provided by interaction with those of different ages, and so come to appreciate and interpret the meaning of their—and the others’—experiences; wholeness, as a goal of faith development, requires such mutuality.¹⁸⁹

The importance is that people of different stages of faith interact with one another. As the community itself demonstrates and grows in the maturing of its faith, and allows for questions and even disagreements with those of younger generations, then the church as a whole can move forward to be a supportive environment for emerging adults to find their place and grow in their faith.

The intergenerational church is supportive by welcoming multiple generations to participate. Glassford cautions that elevating the exclusivity of each developmental stage can disconnect generations from each other.¹⁹⁰ Keeping generations separate works against the supportive relationships. What this means to ministry is the loss of older generations teaching and supporting emerging adults in the Christian faith. Thomas Bergler asserts that “age-segregated environments also tend to constrict the life vision of adolescents. They spend much time focusing on the narrow and sometimes even selfish range of concerns that go along with adolescent development, to the neglect of the ‘outside’ world.”¹⁹¹ While separate programming can be vital for peer relationship

¹⁸⁹ Alan G. Harkness, “Intergenerationality: Biblical and Theological Foundations,” *Christian Educational Journal* 9, no. 1 (2012): 129, accessed September 25, 2013, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost.

¹⁹⁰ Darwin Glassford and Lynn Barger-Elliott, “Toward Intergenerational Ministry in a Post-Christian Era,” *Christian Education Journal* 8, no. 2 (September 1, 2011): 364-378, accessed September 25, 2013, Education Research Complete, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost.

¹⁹¹ Bergler, loc. 199-200.

development and addressing specific needs of young adults, it is important that they are integrated into the whole community.

The instability of relationship transitions and economic/career pressures cause a young adult to question themselves and their place in the world. In a culture with continuing loss of institutional support, it is vital for the church to develop bonds that will support young adults. David Brooks affirms that humans have an intrinsic need to make and keep relationship bonds with others. Those bonds can support them as they go through crisis and change.¹⁹² Today, young adults long for older mature adults to walk alongside them. According to Tim Elmore, young adults long more for relationship than for relevant information. Their desire to know increases as they trust the person sharing with them.¹⁹³ Caroline Beagles also affirms that youth and young adults need and long for mature Christians in their lives. It takes an intergenerational church to support spiritual formation in all its members. She asserts, “The communal, familial nature of the church requires that its members be involved in discipling one another in everyday life.”¹⁹⁴

A Learning Environment

Christian spiritual formation is learned. Strommen and Hardel report that the results from the Search Institute’s Effective Christian Education study indicate a learning

¹⁹² Dale Hudon, “Attachment Theory and Leader-Follower Relationships,” *The Psychologist-Manager Journal* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2013), 148, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/mgr0000003>.

¹⁹³ Elmore, 193.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

environment contributes to intergenerational connectivity. Being able to discuss and reflect on issues of faith enhances a sense of community.¹⁹⁵ Christian Smith cites that a faith-building environment is one in which the “values and beliefs are transmitted from important others to use through formal teaching and informal modeling.”¹⁹⁶ Christian spiritual formation traditionally relied on one generation to pass on the tradition, beliefs, and practices of the Christian faith to the next. They formed a catechesis processes to pass on the faith. The purpose of training the next generation in Israel was to communicate the story of its community and celebrate with annual festivals.¹⁹⁷ The stories communicated both in word and symbol held the community together.¹⁹⁸ One important teaching was the *Shema*, which commanded Israel to perpetuate its faith.¹⁹⁹ The injunction to speak of the commandments constantly was the community’s responsibility to the next generation. It was to be spoken at home and away, lying down and rising up. Spirituality was learned in everyday experience.²⁰⁰

At the heart of our Christian faith is a story. Intergenerational community is informed by that story. Westerhoff cautions that “Unless the story is known, understood, owned, and lived, we and our children will not have Christian faith.”²⁰¹ The ability to

¹⁹⁵ Strommen and Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 152.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁹⁷ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 27.

¹⁹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, “Passion and perspective: two dimensions of education in the Bible,” in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A reader on Theology and Christian Education*, eds. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 72.

¹⁹⁹ Deuteronomy 6:1-5.

²⁰⁰ Brueggemann, 90-91.

²⁰¹ Westerhoff, loc. 617-620.

mature in one's faith is facilitated by the story one believes about one's life. Biblical story is powerful not only because God revealed himself in Scripture, but because the story has the power to shape a whole community. The process today may be different, and the methods may change, but the Gospel story can shape emerging adults for their challenges and questions in life. Without a clear understanding of a person's specific faith tradition, he or she will find it difficult to navigate life.

The goal is to be able to apply learning to life. For the Gospel story to inform young adults in their transitions requires wisdom. Despite the fact many young adults feel they must manage life on their own, wisdom is needed from those who can communicate the Gospel story.²⁰² Parrett and Kang describe the process of catechism as depositing wisdom in responsive individuals.²⁰³ Young adults can feel alone in their decision making. Arnett states that two of the markers for adulthood are the ability to accept responsibility for oneself and the ability to make independent decisions.²⁰⁴ According to Westerhoff and Edwards, one of the goals of ancient catechism was to be able to reflect on Christian tradition in order to make responsible decisions.²⁰⁵ What youth and young adults need is to embrace a belief system that explains their lived reality and provides direction for their lives.

²⁰² Ibid., loc. 133-135.

²⁰³ Gary A. Parrett and S. Steven Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Teaching in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2009), 290.

²⁰⁴ Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 8.

²⁰⁵ Westerhoff and Edwards, 4.

A learning environment is built on a sense of mutuality. Mutuality is involvement *with* others rather than just *to* others.²⁰⁶ Caroline Ramsey describes a way of knowing that affirms the importance of communication that is based on mutual interactions. It is a way of learning that is communal, narrative, and action-centered.²⁰⁷ Meaning is created and depends on how another person reciprocates.²⁰⁸ Often ministry is viewed as a one-way transference of knowledge. Learning the faith involves a sense of community that is collaborative. Ramsey notes that learning that is focused individualistically neglects the importance of social processes that create that knowing.²⁰⁹ Schweitzer affirms that Christian learning contradicts the individualistic outlooks of the culture in which young adults live.²¹⁰ He claims that “Life has become a project for which everyone is responsible by himself or herself.”²¹¹ What has occurred in many churches is that people are learning in parallel relationships, but not interacting. Ramsey argues that it is impossible for knowledge to occur without relating to one another. She states, “A relational perspective allows us to relate to a person, and what might be described as their experience, as a contribution to ongoing relations.”²¹² In relating to one another, people focus on what they create together, how they coordinate with others. Westerhoff critiques that, often, teaching the faith focuses not on the person but on what the teacher, mentor,

²⁰⁶ Harkness, 122.

²⁰⁷ Carolyn Ramsey, “Management Learning: A Scholarship of Practice Centered on Attention?” *Management Learning* 45, no. 1 (2014): 220.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

²¹⁰ Schweitzer, *The Postmodern Life Cycle*, 61.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹² Ramsey, 222.

or parent wants to confer on another and dismiss what is actually happening within the life of the other person.²¹³

A Missional Environment

Learning the Christian faith is a translation process from one generation to the next. It is a cross-cultural endeavor. It is cross-cultural in that it is conversant in the traditions of the church and the culture. Fowler calls for a way to discuss faith in a public forum. Conversations that limit social interaction within the church but not in the broader culture outside the church lose their translation ability.²¹⁴ Fowler states that communities of faith can “stand firmly yet flexibly enough in their own faith traditions” and “can affirm the plurality and diversity of faith in the larger society.”²¹⁵

Faith development theory presents faith as a meaning-making structure. It gives a way to discuss and understand our common experience. This is a way of speaking of faith that affirms tradition but also converses with the postmodern culture. It presents a language for understanding faith in a pluralistic world without degenerating into relativism.²¹⁶ Dean exhorts that “A missional imagination requires the indigenizing practice of translating doctrine and rituals into vibrant public witness.”²¹⁷

²¹³ Westerhoff, loc. 1384-1385.

²¹⁴ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 122-125.

²¹⁵ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 177.

²¹⁶ Parks, *Christian Perspectives*, 95.

²¹⁷ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 117.

The mission of the church determines how it undertakes the spiritual formation of its people. The church's core is a missional directive from Jesus. He said, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."²¹⁸ Dwight J. Zscheile asks a poignant question, "What does it mean to form faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in a missional church in light of God's mission in the world?"²¹⁹ Spiritual formation is not a withdrawal from the world. It's not turned inward and only about individual spiritual growth. Developing is an intentional process that engages people into a counter-cultural community, but not one that withdraws from the larger society in which it is embedded. She states that, "Spiritual formation occurs within the emerging Christian community and in relationship with nonbelieving others."²²⁰ Spiritual formation occurs not only within the church but also out into the world. Privatized faith is a withdrawal from engagement in our communities. To be missional readjusts our thinking from withdrawal to engagement with those in the world.²²¹ Westerhoff states, "Still God does not call us out of the world; he rather sends us into the world. We therefore live as Christians when we discern what God is doing in the world and join God in his work."²²²

²¹⁸ Matthew 28: 18-20, NLT.

²¹⁹ Zscheile, xi.

²²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²²¹ Ibid., 20.

²²² Westerhoff, loc. 754-755.

Without a Christian sense of mission, activism alone can leave a person spiritually shallow.²²³ A sense of mission can move young adults to action. Kenda Creasy Dean states that living for mission “presents a rather stark contrast to Christian attempts to dump Jesus onto people.”²²⁴ God’s mission is to redeem the world and restore it to its intended purpose. This is a larger vision than the individualistic culture into which the church is embedded. This is a calling to live more than for personal fulfillment but a greater purpose of God’s mission in the world. No one generation can meet the current challenges of postmodernity. No one generation alone will be able to overcome an immature and ineffective faith. But together in a dialogue of respect and intentional action, the church can maintain its vibrant ability to transform people and witness to that transformation in a postmodern culture.

Conclusion

The Church is to be a supportive structure for the spiritual formation of young adults. It involves both the process of developmental change and the process of conversion. Christian spiritual formation occurs in relationship. The faith as seeking meaning is a bridge to people without Christ as the center of their lives. The language of engagement with culture neither idolizes nor fears it. Though we do not expect the Kingdom to be fully revealed now, nor will it be implemented by human means, we work for the community of Jesus to show the Kingdom’s character in our lives together.

²²³ Jeffery Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in a Theological Perspective,” In *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 31.

²²⁴ Dean, 88.

Content of the Christian faith is vital. Without content, young adults will not be able to reflect and question the reigning paradigms of the culture and the social world of family, friends, and church. The danger for faith communities is that space is not permitted for people to question and explore matters of faith and personal identity. They either can revert back to prereflective ways of perceptions or look for other spiritual formation guides.

Immersion into a community that welcomes and challenges emerging adults in their faith helps facilitate spiritual formation. This consists of developing a theological lens. The goal is to recognize the given faith young adults do have, and the consumerist postmodern mentality that affects them. The context of young adults is a transitional state of being both in their personal faith stage and the life cycle of the postmodern culture. Without context, young adults on their own are not able to compose their spiritual identity. They may begin to reflect and grow in the crisis of their transitions, but without support, they will revert back to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Wisdom comes as one is able to reflect and discern truth from error. It also consists of developing a sense of calling that moves the conversation away from individualistic and self-serving thinking to a greater purpose for life.

SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

What this paper and following artifact propose is that the church operating as a whole can be a supportive, learning, and missional vehicle to mature young adults spiritually. Programs designed specifically for emerging adults are an essential part of the process. However, young people need to be immersed in a community for spiritual formation to occur. My artifact is an attempt to begin intergenerational exchanges within the church community. This author seeks to create intergenerational dialogue using mentoring tools and guided discussion based on Scripture.

The artifact will be a mentoring guide for older adults who desire to support younger generations in their faith journey. Building a trusting relationship between the mentor and young adult will be a priority. A mutual partnership will be sought, blending the aspirations of young adults with guidance based on scripture. The desired results will be a greater understanding of the Christian faith, help with transitions in the world of work and relationships, and, lastly, having a sense of mission in the world.

The guide will begin with the nature of developing a supportive relationship. The threefold approach, story-formed, Christ-identified, and mission-directed, will frame the discussions. The emerging adult's story will be unpacked. Relating their story to the story found in scripture will lead to a discussion of the Gospel. Gospel-shaped identity will be the basis for examining false identities. Lastly, the importance of Christian mission or vocation will be examined together.

SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

- Goals:
 1. To develop intergenerational relationships that support emerging adults in their aspirations, frustrations, and questions. This involves an accepting and learning environment.
 2. To create an interactive experience with scripture so emerging adults will develop a faith that they own.
 3. To equip young adults to interact with the culture so they will discern how they are being affected by global and consumer influences.
 4. To encourage a maturing faith in all participants so the grounding of one's self-understanding grows in a deeper dedication to embody both the character of Christ and mission of God.
- Audience: Older adults who desire to mentor younger emerging adults.
- Scope and Content: An eight-week program that incorporates a model of three things: being story-formed, Gospel-identified, and missionally engaged. The metaphor of *parakletos*, from the Greek word meaning “advocate,” is used for the type of relationship to be developed. The artifact is a walk-alongside guide for those desiring to mentor young adults. The outline is as follows.
 - What is *Parakletos*?

An overview of the relationship and program are presented.
 - Why *Parakletos*? What is the problem?

The transitional nature of emerging adulthood, the loss of supportive relationships, and the exodus from the church will all be explored.

- Defining the *Parakletos* relationship.
A supportive relationship that includes listening affirming and guiding creates an opportunity for intergenerational interaction.
- The goal of *Parakletos*.
A holistic approach is needed for a fully formed spiritual life to emerge.
This can guide a young adult from a given faith to an owned faith.
- The model for *Parakletos*.
Parakletos uses a threefold approach. It includes being story-formed, Gospel-identified, and missionally engaged.
- Budget: Printing costs absorbed by the church. Travel and other costs will be required by participants.
- Post-graduate considerations: Integrating parents into spiritual formation processes for children, youth and young adults spiritual at home and through the church.
- The Action plan: The prototype program will begin in February 2015.

SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT

The beginning question that I was endeavoring to research was why young adults are leaving the church in increasing measures. I quickly discovered there is a multilayered reason that is related to cultural shifts and the way the church was related to them. Through research on developing trends in youth and young adults' spiritual lives, I shifted my focus from keeping young adults in church to their undeveloped spiritual lives. The adolescent nature of their faith is both a reaction to present church environments and the ambiguous faith they have inherited. James Bergler was very helpful to trace the historical reasons why an immature faith is so prevalent in many churches. While still having an eye on the cultural and ecclesial reasons, I focused on the developmental issues of emerging young adults.

James Fowler has written prolifically on the field of faith development. His understanding gave a greater perspective on how a maturing faith occurs. Interacting with his philosophy, theology, and developmental model gave me insight to understand and critique spiritual formation in emerging adults. Other approaches were insightful and interaction with their authors enhanced areas of development that were lacking in Fowler's approach. But none alone focused on spiritual formation from a developmental perspective as extensively as Fowler. Fowler also has interacted with postmodern thinking and a maturing faith. This was informative since this is the world in which young adults are immersed.

The research led me from trends and critiques to clues about possible solutions. In the beginning, I was hoping to develop a separate ministry or program for emerging

adults. Initially, mentoring surfaced as one aspect of what is missing in young adults' lives. What I concluded is that separate programs have some benefits, but can leave out the very kind of relationships that are needed for a fully developed faith. My conclusion is that intergenerational exchange is needed. Almost every author I researched pointed in this direction. While mentoring is still the focus on my artifact, the way the generations interact has been enhanced to more of a supportive role than a teaching role.

More research needs to be done in connecting the content and the development of faith. First of all, understanding how to incorporate a more formal learning program to equip people to understand the content of the faith would be helpful. This would still contain an interactive environment, but I believe we need a new mind to measure the vibrancy and health of the intergenerational relationships in our faith communities. This would include study of scripture for the purpose of developing a theological understanding in the postmodern culture. Second, would be to develop rites of passage events for youth as a vehicle to teach the contents of Christian faith. This also would be a natural place to include parents and mentors. Lastly, the inclusion of youth and young adults in the entire life of the church will be continually explored.

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Parakletos

Mentoring the Next
Generation

Leader's Training

Manual

Welcome to Parakletos: A “walk alongside” guide

What is *parakletos*? *Parakletos* is a walk-alongside guide for engaging and equipping young adults in their spiritual journey. *Parakletos* is a Greek word for advocate. In Scripture, it is the word used for the Holy Spirit. The Biblical relationship of a *paraclete* is someone to walk alongside in a supportive mentoring relationship. Mentoring is a partnering between two people for mutually agreed upon goals. For those who desire to mentor young adults, mentoring begins with their aspirations. The older adult is a person who has more experience and can help provide perspective. The younger adult has challenges that need guidance. Together, their shared experience can help grow each other in their faith. The mentoring process of *Parakletos* is distinctive in that it is focused first on how the relationship evolves, then on what is happening spiritually in lives of those involved.

You will be involved in a process that is all about the interaction between three people: you the mentor, a young adult, and God’s Spirit. To be aware that this relationship happens in the presence of God does two things. It takes the pressure off either person to make something happen and it shifts the relationship from what two people are doing together to what God by his Spirit will do. We believe that when we intentionally come together for mutual guidance from God, He will be involved. *Parakletos* mentoring is focused on the development of the relationship as the continuing avenue for the Spirit to work.

Who is this manual designed for?

It is for someone who:

- Is in a growing relationship with God.
- Loves Christ and desires to be used by Him.
- Is willing to learn and grow along with a young adult.
- Is willing to invest time (an hour a week for eight weeks is a great beginning) and attention in a mentoring relationship.

If this is you, then this manual is designed for equipping you to be a mentor to younger generations by helping you to do the following:

- Understand the obstacles and opportunities for young adult spiritual formation.
- Develop a fresh perspective of the nature of how supportive mentoring relationships occur.
- Give you a working model on how the process for young adult spiritual formation happens.

The Goal for Parakletos

The goal of the mentoring relationship with young adults is that they would know and grow in Jesus. For them to embrace their faith they need to own their faith. Young adults move from a given faith to an owned faith. A given faith one is derived from others, but an owned faith is one that is personally embraced. This movement as

illustrated below is focused on developing a vibrant relationship with Jesus. *Parakletos* mentors make themselves available to facilitate that relationship.



The process for a young adult “owning” his or her faith happens in the middle of their transitions. To grow in faith is often a messy process. This process can be unsettling, imperfect, but very rewarding. The very pressures they are undergoing are a great opportunity for them to grow in exponential ways.

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION: *The Rich Young Ruler*

Read Matthew 19:16-22

- What kind of faith did this man have?
- What hindered him from this kind of faith Jesus proposed?
- What does Jesus do to challenge him to own his faith?

Why Parakletos? - The Challenges of Emerging Adulthood

Young Adults Are Undergoing Huge Transitions

Young adults’ lives are categorized by constant change. The transitions that they face from youth to adulthood are many. There are similarities to what older generations have faced as well. But things are different for today’s emerging adults. The world has changed. The way it has changed has itself created the challenges that young adults face. To help young people in these transitions requires that mentors understand their world.

The Characteristics of Emerging Adults

Identity Explorations

Young adults are asking questions about who they are:

- They are in a stage of life where their self-understanding is being totally rearranged.
- While they may admire and respect their parents, they are questioning many of their beliefs and practices.
- During this transitional state they are rethinking their relationships of the past and their influence.
- They are trying to distinguish for themselves their own values apart from other people.
- They are rethinking their faith.
- They are faced with many alternative lifestyles and images of success that the culture presents.

This can seem daunting. Their transitions can be destabilizing and their identity challenged by a world they might not feel ready for.

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION: *The Hunger Games*

Imagine powerful people rounding up young adults in every city. The government is going to put them on display. They must fight to the death until one victor remains.

This is all to keep order in the districts. Katniss Everdeen is the central character in the

popular book trilogy and movie series *The Hunger Games*. Throughout the story, she must survive the oppression of the Capitol that controls the county of Panem. She faces overwhelming threats to her emotional and physical well-being. In the process, her identity is being shaped.

- What does this tell us about emerging adults surviving in a competitive world?
- How is this like or unlike the way young adults feel in their transitions?
- Why might the pressure to achieve and make a living seem daunting to them?

Feeling In Between

Young adults have a sense of being in-between stages:

- They are no longer adolescents but do not feel they have fully become adults.
- They feel markers of adulthood are delayed; such as finding a career, getting married and having children.
- They are making decisions for their lives; however, they can get lost in all the options.
- In this in-between stage often they can feel a loss of supportive relationships.

Here are a few reasons for this:

1. There is a sense of abandonment from parents and other adults.

Many parents have made their careers a primary concern. Others are so preoccupied with their responsibilities and challenges that they neglect the nurturing of their own children.

2. Separating generations limits the influence of older adults and increases the influence of peers. In many churches the youth and children are placed in environments where interaction with the entire congregation is limited. As in public schools, the influence of peer relationships becomes predominant just by the fact of the number of hours they spend together.
3. Separating generations can exclude them from participation. Youth groups often have their own teaching, activities, and music. Focusing on the needs of younger generations is laudable. But this has backfired. The transition from youth group to the adult church environment can be a huge culture shock. Young adults lose their interest and their place to connect.

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION: *Sticky Faith*

In their book *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*, Kara Powell and Chap Clark state, “How you express and live out your faith may have a greater impact on your son or daughter than anything else.”

- What is it that parents have that can be more influential than other people?
- How does talking about a person’s faith with young people help grow their faith?
- How could keeping generations separate at church hinder young adult’s spiritual formation?

Slippery Commitments

Young adults are cautious about commitments partly because they are reevaluating their commitments. As they seek to establish their own sense of the self, the values that they inherited from parents are being challenged. The slipperiness comes from a tension between a desire for stability and establishing a life of their own. They are becoming less and less committed to the church as well. David Kinnaman reports that many youth that attend church are enthusiastic in their faith, but they lose that enthusiasm as they transition to young adulthood.¹ He states that there is a 43 percent decline in church involvement between the teen and early adult years.² Three possible reasons for them leaving are:

- The church is viewed as judgmental.
- They don't see the church as relevant.
- They feel the church does not welcome their abilities and viewpoint.

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION: *Religions Are All the Same*

Christian Smith interviewed a young lady on different religions. She replied that, "I just think it's all subjective to each person. I really do think that everything is pretty much subjective"³

- Why do you think this young lady feels this way?

¹ Kinnaman, David, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Location 232-233, Kindle eBook..

² Ibid., Location 250-251.

³ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 49.

- If this is the thinking that is common in today's world, why would young adults struggle with their faith commitments?
- How can these characteristics be an opportunity to know and grow in Jesus?

Name some things that compete for strong commitments in our world.

Types of Mentoring Relationships

Growing a Walk Alongside relationship can take many forms. The model we are using is a mentoring model that is focused on relationship building. Defining this relationship will help guide the kinds of conversations and activities of this process.

1. **Coach:** A coach walks alongside for the purpose of skill development. He or she is trying to draw answers out of a person for their life's challenges. The advantage this has for assisting young adults is that it does not try to impose answers on young people.
2. **Counselor:** This person gives advice and perspective to another person. Giving advice is not the primary role in *Parakletos* relationship. A counselor examines why a person behaves the way he or she does and proposes solutions.
3. **Teacher:** This relationship focuses on imparting knowledge or motivation to learn. A teacher may use many interactive methods. This manual also presents

a few sidebar activities as well. Through the interaction opportunities for understanding the Christian faith present themselves.

4. Sponsor: A sponsor is a connector. He or she connects a person to resources to help a person succeed. Traditionally, in religious training, this person is responsible to connect a person to the Christian faith by asking and answering questions. Sponsors may be more focused on connecting people to new knowledge than developing a relationship.
5. Spiritual guide: This person provides accountability for spiritual practices that a person desires to implement in life. Spiritual guide focuses on practices more than learning the content of faith, although both are involved.
6. Discippler: To be discippled is to be shaped into the character of another person. A discippler is helping another person in habits that develop the character of Jesus. A few top habits are prayer, Bible reading, small group discussion, worship and serving others.

Defining a *Parakletos* Relationship

Parakletos uses aspects of all six roles to a certain degree. *Parakletos* mentoring begins with a trusting relationship that includes learning about the Christian faith, developing practices that sustain that faith and helping young adults navigate life in light of their faith. To walk alongside of another person is not about trying to be an expert. It means to guide a person in an indirect way. We are not just transferring information from one person to another. This is a two-way thing. What often happens is that together you will strengthen each other's faith. The mentor becomes the mentored. Come ready to

learn yourself. The goal is a causal mentoring relationship. It is more of a *guide* than an *advice-giver*. What is missing in so many young people's lives is people who welcome a relationship with them, respect them where they are in their faith journey, listen to their concerns, doubts, opinions without judgment, and guide them to discover their God-given calling. It involves a listening, affirming, and guiding relationship.

Characteristics of a Parakletos Relationship

1. **Listening:** Listening is an avenue to build a bridge between generations. Listening opens up ways to discover each other's worlds and provide a space for the Spirit to work. This is about developing trust between two people. Trust involves taking an interest in another person by being totally present and attentive, listening well and having an attitude of respect. Creating a trusting environment can lead to being open from input from another person. It is less focused on telling and more focused on hearing what is going on in the young adult's life. When two people really see each other as human beings with longings, strengths and weaknesses, their commonness can draw them together. Trust is established by creating a place where young adults feel free to express their opinions and questions in a nonjudgmental environment. In this way both people can grow in their spiritual life as they talk together. Older adults can learn from young adults as well as young adults can inform older ones about their world.

ACTION POINT: LISTENING ACTIVITY

(Have people get with a partner and do the following activity.)

Take turns listening to a partner tell about one of his or her favorite activities. Do this for five minutes without interrupting. Pay attention to where you may have common experiences. Repeat back to them what you have learned. Then switch roles. Take turns talking about the experience for 3 minutes. Listen again without adding any comments. Then, discuss how to listen across generations when your preferences may be very different.

2. Affirming: Today, young adults long for older mature adults to walk alongside them. With so many transitions within their lives and in our culture, an older adult can create a sense of perspective and stability. By affirming their opinions without editing, you can then look for a bridge between your worlds. Affirming it not about validating behavior or opinions, but accepting people where they are at in their faith journey. When something seems unclear, look for opportunities to ask clarifying questions. Often bringing things out in the open help both the mentor and the young adult see things more clearly.

ACTION POINT: AFFIRMING ACTIVITY

(Have people get with a partner and do the following activity.)

Talk with a partner about a difficult transition that he or she had to make. Ask questions that help clarify what happened. Look for ways to affirm the other person's perspective. Then reverse roles. When finished, discuss the similarities and differences

between your experiences. How might engaging with young adults be similar or different from your discussion?

3. **Guiding:** Your role is to guide young adults. A guide is there to foster discussion that leads them to decide for themselves what course of action to take in their lives. For young adult the ability to gain perspective apart from their youth is facilitated best by another person guiding them. Asking questions that move a person to action is a challenging skill to learn. It means to guide without telling a person what to do. Wisdom is the ability to discern what is best for a person's life. Guiding people in wisdom is to help them discover it for themselves.

ACTION POINT: GUIDING WITHOUT TELLING

(Have an open discussion with everyone on the following activity.)

Imagine that you trying to guide a young adult. You are trying to help her or him decide which job is best. How would you ask questions that would guide him/her without telling him/her what they should do? Here are a few suggestions:

- What have you done in the past that you loved doing? What skills did you find yourself doing?
- What do you think are your strengths? What are some strengths others have noticed in you?
- If your resources and skills were not an issue, what do you see yourself doing in five years?

Young adults in the local church will need both supportive respectful relationships and opportunities to express their particular emerging strengths. Older adults can give them the space to creatively express their faith while guiding them to hold on to the essentials of that faith.

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION: *Barnabas the Encourager*

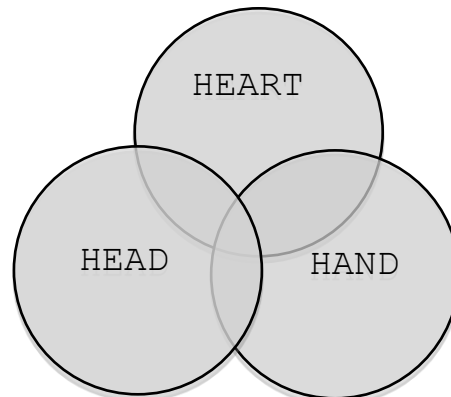
Read Acts 4:36-37, 9:26-27, 11:21-28.

- What quality do you see in Barnabas that makes him a good candidate for a mentor?
- What does Barnabas see in Paul that the other disciples of Jesus do not? Why do you think this is so?
- How does Barnabas affirm the calling of the believers in Antioch?

Engaging Emerging Adults to Own Their Faith

To be engaged in faith is more than our current culture's perceptions. Our culture talks about faith to mean being "true to oneself." Christian faith occurs as a person is true to what God has created them to be. We believe that we are created in the image of God. Growing in faith is growing in the way we are created to be. It may be challenging, but it resonates with a person the more she/he embraces that faith. We are created to know and be like Jesus Christ. We are created to engage with God with all that we are. Jesus calls us to love God with all our hearts, mind, and strength. An owned faith engages all three. It means to grow as a whole person. It involves shaping our heads, hearts, and hands.

1. Head: Thoughts shape people's spiritual lives. Understanding faith is to know what a person believes and why he or she believes it. It is the ability to grasp what it means to be a Christian in the challenges people face. To grow in faith a person needs a reference that is beyond themselves. Understanding Scripture has the ability to reshape a person's thinking. As you engage with Scripture with a young adult, trust that the Spirit is present enabling each person to hear what God is saying. It will challenge your thinking, but it will be rewarding as you gain fresh perspective on how to navigate life.
2. Heart: Emotions shape people's spiritual lives. Our emotional makeup often drives our thinking self. We do what we desire. Those desires can lead us to grow in Christ or distract us from Christ. In a culture that esteems the therapeutic, engaging emotions is vital. When our emotions are engaged it can lead to new levels of commitment to Christ and His purpose for us.
3. Hand: Our physical bodies are part of us. We grow hungry, tired, and sick or energized, healthy, and satisfied. Like any athletic trainer knows, bodies become strong by developing routines. The habits people develop with their bodies affect their thinking and emotions. These practices that become routine shape our minds and emotions. When it comes right down to it, we become what we do.



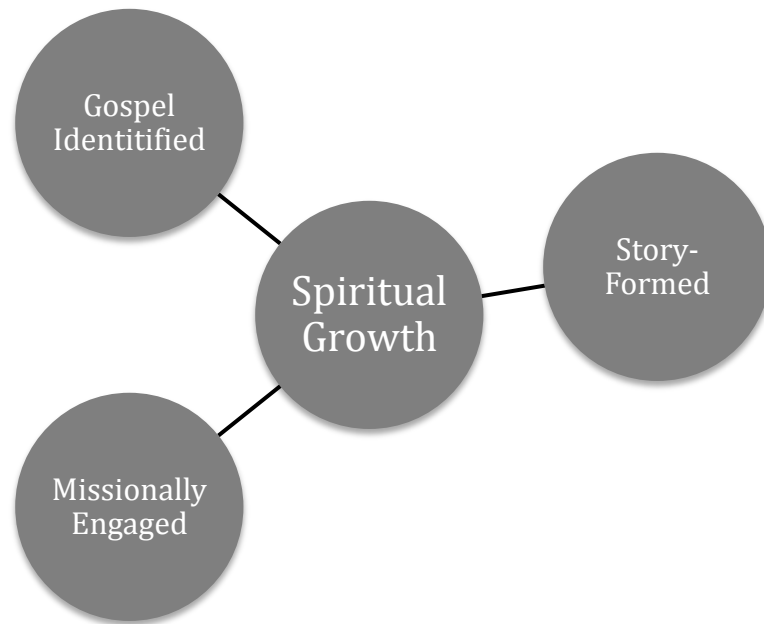
Write three experiences that affected your life for each of these:

- When was a time you had a significant emotionally experience? How did it affect your physical and mental well-being?

- Describe a time you had a significant physical challenge. How did it affect your thought process and emotional reaction?

- Describe a time that you had a significant new understanding about life—an “ah-ha” moment? How did it affect both your emotional and physical reactions?

The Model for Parakletos: The Essentials for Developing a Strong Faith.



1. **Story Formed:** Discovering a young adult's story.

Every person has a story that can be explored and reexamined. The ability to mature in one's faith is facilitated by the story one believes about one's life. It involves understanding setbacks and opportunities. It involves looking for redemptive purposes in that story. It asks, "what else is going on in your story?" or "How do you see God interacting with your story?" Unpacking a young adult's story will take time and reflection. It can be unpacked as the mentoring relationship develops. To understand a person's story can be understood as you learn to unpack your story.

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION: *Thirsty for Living Water*

Read John 4:1-26.

- How does Jesus discover this woman's story?
- How does Jesus know her setback?
- How does Jesus help this woman discover God's redemptive purpose for her story?

Understanding our Story Activity

The following activity will help you understand the power of your story. Get a pad of sticky notes and a pen. For the next fifteen minutes write out all the major events of your life. Write one event per sticky note. Start with your beginnings. What are some significant early experiences? Think about events at home, at school, and then move to young adulthood and beyond. This is a brainstorming activity, so just write any significant events that come to mind.

- After the time limit, put them in chronological order on a sheet of poster paper.
- When finished, rewrite the significant events on different colored sticky notes. These are pivotal events that are either negative or positive. Use one color for average events, one color for negative setbacks in your life, and one color for positive moments.
- Now evaluate where you see a redemptive event, one that was a positive turn around for you.

- Next reflect on your responses to these events. Think about how these affected you. Lastly, what skills do you see surfacing in your life? Write your answers below.

- Redemptive events:

- Responses to events:

- Skills:

Group follow-up: How did this activity help you understand your story better?

2. Gospel Identified: Discovering a person's God-given identity in Christ.

The lives of young adults are in the middle of major changes at the same time the world is constantly changing. Nothing seems settled. It is of vital importance to know who they are in relationship to Christ, to others, and to the world in which they live. Young adults are renegotiating their identity. Their identity is moving from being dependent to navigating life for themselves. The goal is to help them move from being shaped by the unexamined assumptions of their social environment to commitment to Christ. It is to help them to trust God with their lives. The ability to trust God gives a sense of stability to a person. Transitions in life provide an opportunity to gain certainty in the wider uncertain world in which young adults are attempting to find a place. It is

letting the Gospel inform their imagination and reshape their affections. This is not only what young adults need, you will find that this is what every Christ follower is called to do. This involves the intersection the following things:

- Desires: Young adults are driven by their desires for their lives.
- Purposes: Exploring God's purposes can open up new ways of viewing young adults' identity.
- Abilities: Young adults have strengths and abilities that both define them and are the gift they offer to the world.

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION: *A Night Guide*

Read John 3:1-17.

- How are Nicodemus' desires similar to young adults?
- What is Nicodemus' identity? How does this hinder him?
- Where is Jesus directing him to find his identity?
- How is this like or unlike a mentoring relationship with young adults?

3. Missionally Engaged: Following God's mission for our lives.

Christ calls us to the mission of God. A mission involves being sent to act or speak on behalf of another person. Another way to say this is that each person has a calling. We each speak and act about what is most important to our lives. Unfortunately, a sense of calling has been lost almost entirely to the importance of making a living.

Instead we look for opportunities to serve others in light of God's mission. First we must know God's mission. God's mission involves three things:

1. Creating: God cares and sustains what he makes.
 - What are ways young adults might see God's creation?
 - What are some ecological issues that might be important to them?
 - How is this part of a Christian calling?

2. Guiding: God rules over his creation.
 - What is the opposite of God's rule?
 - What does social justice have to do with God's rule?
 - Why is this important in talking with young adults about their calling?

3. Reconciling: God offers a redemptive purpose in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - Why is God's reconciling work needed in today's world?
 - Where might the reconciling work of God be hard for some people to accept?
 - How can this be an important part of a young adult's calling?

We are called to show our love for God in the way we relate to this world. We join God in caring for this world, bringing order out of chaos and showing his redemptive purpose for everyone.

SIDEBAR CONVERSATION: *A Counterfeit Calling*

Read John 21:1-23

- What is Peter's calling?
- What counterfeit calling did he submit to? Why?
- Why did he ask about John's calling?
- How does this relate to our callings?

Identifying Counterfeit Callings

- I am who others say I am.

Pressure to live other people's expectations can be harmful. Where have you seen this in your own life? How can what God says about in Scripture change this?

- I am what image I create.

Starbucks is big in the Northwest. Do you have images that you resonate with? Nike, Apple, Dior, Haagen Dazs, Calvin Klein, or Prada? What about movie heroes or musicians? Pop culture affects young adults more than about anything else. We all are affected by it. We know we are all being bombarded with messages that are trying to influence us. For you and I, the images we love shape us. Knowing what images affect us is not always easy to see in ourselves. Reflect on what images from our culture affect your own generation. Discuss how image drives advertising. What desires that emerging adults have does it appeal to? How could this be harmful?

- I am what I accomplish in life.

Where have you seen this in your own life? Why could this be a difficult discussion to have with young adults?

Using a God-given Calling

To know and live with a sense of mission gives young adults confidence in themselves. The goal is to live beyond the blind optimism that is prevalent in some young adults and face the realistic opportunities and dangers of life in transition. Growing in faith and the aspirations of young adults converge here. Here the “space” created by transition is an opportunity to envisage and embrace a lifestyle that matures an emerging adult’s faith. It involves the ability to assert their new Christian gifts and identity. With that, young adults can be secure enough and wise enough to make commitments in relationships, work, church, and their community. While responsibly is both yearned for and feared, commitments are what will give young adults the security and new identity they long for.

Growing in faith is an ongoing process. It occurs in a social environment with God and others. It involves a supportive relationship that moves young adults from their story, to their identity in Christ and their God given calling. That interchange can supply fresh energy and deepen faith.

SIDEBAR CONVERSATION: *Don't Waste Your Life*

Meg Jay states that the 20s are not a time to waste. They are an opportunity to grow and pursue one's goals and establish one's sense of self.⁴ How does this knowledge help or hinder young adults as they go through transitions?

Knowing the Back-story

Meeting another person is more than we think. When you meet someone, two people with two completely different back-stories begin to interact. There is something going on in each person and there is something going on between them. Being aware of this fact is a great first step to knowing each other. The moment you meet someone you begin to form an opinion about him or her. This happens both ways. For some people this can be very intimidating. For others this makes little difference.

To guide another person is to be aware that the learning and growing goes two ways. To begin with, know yourself well. Why do you desire to help another person grow? Here is a checklist for you to consider.

- ✓ Why is growing spiritually important for me?

⁴ Meg Jay, *The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter and How to Make the Most of Them*, (New York: Twelve; Hachette Book Group, 2013).

- ✓ What are my greatest strengths?

- ✓ What is a next step in my life about which I would like clarity?

The Mentoring Agreement

To be successful in any relationship, you have to talk about expectations. To have this up front will avert problems in the future. This agreement helps clarify what you desire to do together. An agreement has great power to shape people's lives together. Prayerfully consider the following questions as you begin this journey together.

- ✓ Who might be a good person for you to initiate a mentoring relationship with?

- ✓ What motivates you to connect with young adults?

- ✓ What do you hope to accomplish together?

- ✓ How much time can you devote to this process?

We recommend at least an hour a week for the next 8 weeks.

- ✓ When and where will you meet

When _____

Where _____

How long _____

(Back Page)

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:16-19)