Mapping the Missional Landscape of Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

What will it take to make disciples of Jesus among emerging adults in America today? This presentation will map the cultural and religious landscape of emerging adulthood by answering three crucial questions: 1) Are emerging adults today less religious than those of previous generations? 2) What are the religious lives of emerging adults like? 3) What are the causes of these patterns of religion and spirituality among emerging adults? In missiological terms, multiple people groups can be found among emerging adults, and that reality must inform disciple making efforts.

What would we find if we studied emerging adults in America like an unreached people group? Much attention has been paid by both social science researchers and Christian leaders to the decline of spiritual interest and church attendance among emerging adults. The Christian authors writing about this phenomenon either explicitly claim or implicitly assume the following: 1) more emerging adults are leaving the church today than in the past 2) churches, parents, and youth ministries are to blame for this exodus of emerging adults, and therefore 3) changes in the ways churches and families disciple teenagers can fix this problem.[1]

As we shall see, claims 1 and 2 are highly questionable and may even be false, depending upon which subgroup of emerging adults we are considering. There is empirical evidence to support claim 3 since at least two longitudinal studies confirm that right kinds of religious socialization during adolescence make it more probable that a young person will continue to have a strong faith when they are between the ages of 18 and 23. But Christian mission strategists have paid far too little attention to the cultural, economic, and social patterns shaping emerging adult lives. Sociologically speaking, it is surprising that *any* Americans in their early twenties attend church regularly because their life stage is perfectly structured to discourage religious involvement. In addition, emerging adult life experiences vary considerably, especially in contrast with the relatively more homogenous life stage of adolescence. For example, some are delaying marriage and parenting to spend extra time on education and searching for the perfect career, while others are having children and delaying

their education, sometimes indefinitely. Those and other diverse life experiences make a big difference in emerging adults' levels of religious interest and involvement.

Answering several key questions will help us map the landscape of emerging adulthood so that missionaries can reach this relatively unreached people group. First, are emerging adults today less religious than those of previous generations? Second, what are the religious lives of emerging adults like? Third, what are some of the causes of these patterns of religion and spirituality among young adults? As it turns out, among emerging adults in America we find several people groups that will require different mission strategies. And the diverse religious landscape of emerging adulthood suggests that those who care about emerging adults cannot rely solely on efforts to retain young people who grow up in church, as important as those efforts are. To truly reach these unreached peoples, we will need to send missionaries to them who can speak their languages and build bridges to their cultural worlds.

Are Emerging Adults Today Less Religious Than Those of Previous Generations?

All researchers agree that emerging adults are less religious than either adolescents or older adults. Since this pattern has been observed at least since the 1960s, and may have existed even before then, there is clearly an age or developmental stage effect at work here.[2] Something about being in one's late teens and early twenties in 20th and 21st century America has not been conducive to religious involvement.

Social scientists do not agree on whether emerging adults today are less religious than those of previous generations. Much of the popular ministry literature on family ministry and intergenerational ministry assumes that young people are leaving the church in unprecedented numbers after high school. This claim is significant because some are using it to blame youth ministry for this decline and to demand radical restructurings of church life and youth ministry.[3]

Certainly far too many young people who are active in church during their teenage years become inactive during their twenties, and that is bad both for them and for the church. The emerging adult slump in religious participation is a real problem and should be a cause for concern and for action. But the claim that the exodus of emerging adults from church has gotten significantly worse over time is debatable for several reasons. First, the decline starts before high school graduation. Church attendance among teenagers begins to decline at least by age 15, and the percentage of young Americans who attends church weekly declines each year of their lives until it reaches a low of about 15% in their early twenties, at which point, weekly attendance levels off for the rest of the twenties at somewhere near the 20% mark.[4] Nationally representative youth surveys differ in the exact percentages of church attendance they find at different ages, but the overall trend is clear. Church attendance in the twenties is about half of what it was during the early teen years, and that decline begins *before* emerging adulthood.

Second, even among emerging adults, it is not clear that all religious groups have seen an increase in church defections over time. Hill analyzed data from the General Social Surveys from the 1970s to the 2010s and found that there has been some decline over time in how many emerging adult Protestants are attending church. But when he separated those who attended

often from those who attended only once or twice a year, he found a clear difference. If we look only at the most committed emerging adult Protestants, those who attended church weekly or almost weekly, we find that the percentage of that group that leaves church in their twenties has not grown during the period Hill studied. So the decrease of church attendance among Protestants comes from a greater percentage of nominal Protestants giving up completely on church attendance in their twenties. Similar patterns appear among those who say they pray daily and strongly identify with their Protestant faith. These kinds of emerging adults are not leaving the church or changing their religious behaviors or preferences more often today than they did in the 1970s. About 1/3 of regularly attending teenagers stop attending church during their twenties, and that proportion has held steady since 1972. So the increases observed since the 1990s and early 2000s in the overall percentages of those in their twenties who claim no religious affiliation, low interest in religion, low church attendance, or who never pray, etc… are not coming from among committed Protestants. Rather they are coming from one of three sources: 1) children raised in families with little or no religious socialization 2) nominal Protestants who attended church sporadically during childhood or adolescence 3) Catholics. Roman Catholics are losing emerging adults more today than they were in the 1970s, so they are the only major Christian group that fits the common perception.[5] Other evidence confirms that most religiously unaffiliated emerging adults do not come from white Evangelical Protestant or Black Protestant upbringings. In the 2012 Millennial Values survey, the emerging adults who reported no religious affiliation grew up with the following religious backgrounds: 35% unaffiliated, 21% white mainline Protestant, 23% Catholic 8% other Christian, and 4% non-Christian. Young people raised as Black Protestants or white Evangelical Protestants each accounted for 4% of the currently unaffiliated.[6]

In contrast, Twenge and her colleagues analyzed nationally representative survey data on 8th graders, 10th graders, 12th graders and college freshmen from 1966 to 2014 and concluded that "recent cohorts of American adolescents are less religiously oriented than their predecessors, although the majority are still involved with religion."[7] Their findings confirm that religious decline begins in high school or even junior high school. But in contrast to Hill's interpretation, their analysis suggests that young people's interest and participation in religion have declined over time. The percentages of 8th graders, 10th graders and 12th graders and college freshmen who claim no religious affiliation, who never attend religious services, and who say religion is not important to them have grown over time, especially since 2000. Similarly, the percentage of each age group who expressed confidence in religious institutions and who prayed regularly declined over time. All of these cohort effects were more pronounced among 12th graders and college freshmen than 8th and 10th graders. It is important to note that each of these non-religious attitudes and behaviors are still held by a minority in each age group, with percentages typically 25% or less. But that minority has grown over time for all indicators measured by these surveys and for all age groups analyzed by Twenge and her team. Another important qualifier is that the college freshman surveys only asked whether the student had attended religious services at least once in the past year.[8] That question is unable to distinguish between regular and sporadic attenders. But according to Hill's analysis, it is precisely the sporadic attenders who are less likely to be attending or identifying with a particular religious group than their counterparts were in the past.

Part of the confusion comes from the fact that Hill and Twenge et. al. were actually investigating different demographic groups. Hill analyzed religious behaviors and attitudes of all 18 to 29 year-olds. Twenge analyzed adolescents and college freshmen at the very beginning of emerging adulthood. Twenge's analysis is thus unable to tell us what happens to the religious lives of those in their twenties and how that has changed over time. Still, these two studies advance contradictory conclusions about religious decline over time among emerging adults.

There are several possible ways these apparently contradictory findings might be reconciled. It could be that the increase over time in the percentage of Roman Catholics who become less religious in their twenties makes it seem like there is an overall drop in religiosity when researchers lump all emerging adults together, as Twenge's analysis does. Another factor is that some emerging adults actually become more religious than they were during adolescence, but the national surveys analyzed by Twenge and Hill are not designed to identify and measure that group. The National Study of Youth and Religion found in their longitudinal study that more than 10% of nonreligious teenagers became conservative Protestants by the age of 18 to 23, while 7% became Catholic.[9] On the other hand, research on church growth suggests that particular denominations or groupings of denominations, such as Evangelical Protestants, grow by reproduction and religious socialization more than they grow through conversions. Those who argue that birth rates account for much of church growth and decline further note that in the 1990s the birth rate among conservative Protestants declined, thereby slowing the numerical growth of that group.[10] This fact could help explain why Twenge found that fewer college freshmen were strongly religious especially after 2010 – just when the Evangelical baby bust was hitting university. Another possibility is that older Protestant emerging adults are returning to church at about the same rate as in the past, at least partially cancelling out the higher attrition rate just after high school that Twenge found. Hill's findings that church attendance bottoms out at 15% in the early twenties and then rises to 20% for the remainder of the twenties seems to support this hypothesis.[11]

What are the missiological implications of this complex and sometimes contradictory body of evidence? First, headlines and sound bites cannot accurately represent what has changed over time in the religiosity of emerging adults. Although there clearly have been some kinds of decline over time, there is no uniform, across the board decline that has effected all emerging adults equally. Nominal Christians of all varieties seem to be more likely today than in the past to stop going to church completely and to stop identifying themselves with any religious group. In contrast, emerging adults who were committed Christians as teenagers and who were raised in white Evangelical and Black Protestant churches are about as religious today as they were in the past. And for now, at least in those two groups, it seems that enough people are returning to church in the second half of their twenties to counteract any increase in defections in the first half of the twenties. Roman Catholic emerging adults do present an especially challenging case that deserves concerted attention, but that important group will not be extensively treated in this article. While there is much to do to retain more emerging adults, panic is not in order. At the very least, we can say that there is nothing so dramatically new in these patterns that we can justify harshly rebuking conservative Protestant and African American church leaders or wholesale dismantling of youth programs. Whatever is going

wrong with emerging adults has been going on at least since the 1960s, and at about the same rate. That fifty year period has seen many changes in church structures, strategies, and youth ministries among Protestants, all producing about the same results regarding young adult retention. It is theoretically possible that all of these efforts have been misguided or underperforming, but then how do we explain the differential effects of white Evangelical Protestant and Black Protestant vs. Roman Catholic religious socialization? The exodus from church during emerging adulthood is a persistent problem that is being caused by multiple factors and cannot be blamed solely on church or family practices. Rather than relying on questionable blanket statements about religious decline among emerging adults, we would do better to examine in detail the patterns of their religious lives and the influences that shape those patterns.

What Are the Religious Lives of Emerging Adults Like?

The broad pattern of religion and spirituality in the lives of emerging adults is clear: public religious practice declines a lot, private religious practices and felt importance of faith decline somewhat, and basic theistic beliefs decline only a little. For example, among Conservative Protestants (CP) in the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), weekly church attendance declined from 59% during the teen years to 28% in the early emerging adult years. But the practice of daily prayer declined only 10 percentage points from 52% to 42%. Similarly, the percentage of CP emerging adults who claimed that their religious faith was extremely important and shaped their daily life declined from 70% to 57%. Meanwhile, 87% of CP continued to believe in God (a decline of 8 percentage points) and 74% continued to believe God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today (5 percentage point decline). And 35% of CP emerging adults still claimed to feel "extremely or very close to God" (down 13 percentage points). Similar patterns were found among Black Protestants, who started higher in each category, declined about the same amount, and so ended up with even higher numbers in each category that CP emerging adults.[12] Although all religious beliefs and practices decline in emerging adulthood, weekly church attendance by far declines the most, and it even tends to decline among the subgroups of young Americans who are the most religious in other ways.

Which religious practices were stronger, and which were weaker among the emerging adults in the NSYR? As we have seen, daily personal prayer was strong (CP 42%, BP 43%). Interestingly, 39% of CP reported reading a devotional, religious or spiritual book in the last year, while only 26% of BP did so. Also of interest is the fact that 51% of conservative Protestant and 40% of Black Protestant emerging adults had "shared own religious faith with someone not of faith" in the past year.[13] We don't know anything about the circumstances or about what the survey respondents understood this question to mean, but at the very least, this finding suggests that CP and BP emerging adults are having conversations about faith with their peers.[14] Another significant finding for our purposes is that very few emerging adults ever attend religious education activities (11% overall, 15% CP, 15% BP). Yet many more claim to be "very interested" in learning about religion (32% overall, 40% CP, 50% BP). On the other hand, although so many claim to want to learn about their faith, few read the Bible daily (6% overall, 10% CP, 7% BP) while significant percentages admit they never read the Bible (50% overall, 31%

CP, 30% BP). Emerging adults seem somewhat open to learning about faith with their peers and quite open to private prayer. Some might even be open to experimenting with previously untried religious practices. The only religious practice that increased among emerging adults in the NSYR was "religious or spiritual meditation not including prayer," although that increase was minor and the practice overall was rare. It is important to note that attendance at religious education and daily Bible reading were low on average during adolescence too, so it is not surprising that those practices remained low in emerging adulthood.[15]

Religious traditions in America can be divided between those that are high and low on emotional and experiential engagement of young people, and this divide contributes to the diversity of religious life among emerging adults. Conservative Protestants, Black Protestants, and Mormons in the NSYR consistently scored higher as both adolescents and emerging adults on measures that indicated stronger emotional attachment to religion and powerful religious experiences. Thus, emerging adults from these traditions more commonly claimed that in the last two years their faith was "very or extremely important to them," they felt "very or extremely close to God," believed they had become "more religious," experienced an answer to prayer or specific guidance from God, witnessed or experienced a miracle, or made a personal commitment to live their life for God. In contrast, Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish emerging adults scored significantly lower on each of those measures, just as they had in high school. Viewing emerging adult religiosity through the lens of religious experiences gives a different perspective than what we can see from beliefs and practices. The percentages of CP and BP emerging adults who had experienced answered prayer, miracles and a personal commitment to God in the past two years ranged from 47% to 71%.[16] Emerging adults from other religious groups also report affective experiences with God, but only CP and BP emerging adults have percentages in these categories that sometimes exceed the percentages who say they attend church regularly. So even though those who are the most religious also tend to attend church often, there are significant numbers of emerging adults who don't go to church very often but who nevertheless are having religious experiences that help them connect emotionally to their faith.

Another way to distinguish religious tribes among emerging adults is to look at common combinations of religious belief, practice and experience and use that information to identify religious types. Smith and his colleagues in the National Study of Youth and Religion identified six religious types among emerging adults ages 18-23: Committed Traditionalists (about 15% of the emerging adults they interviewed in 2007-2008), Selective Adherents (30%), Spiritually Open (15%), Religiously Indifferent (25%), Religiously Disconnected (5%) and Irreligious (10%).[17] The existence and distribution of these types demonstrates the considerable religious diversity among emerging adults. And not surprisingly, that religious diversity tends to expand in the less committed direction compared with the religious interest and involvement of these same young people when they were in high school.[18]

Perhaps more importantly for our purposes, when we look in more detail at Smith's six religious types, we find that there was a wide variety not just of religious practice and belief, but of general orientations toward religion. Particularly notable is that it was really only the "Committed Traditionalists" who consistently said religion was important to them. Even the next most religious group, the "Selective Adherents" tended not only to pick and choose which

parts of their religious upbringings to accept, they also compartmentalized their faith and kept it in the background of their lives. A few of the "Spiritually Open" were active religious seekers, but for the most part, those outside the "Committed Traditionalist" group were not very invested in religion one way or the other. But their disengagement took many forms. The Irreligious were suspicious or antagonistic toward religion, the Disconnected knew nothing about it, and the Indifferent knew about it but did not care much about it.[19] In particular, Smith and his team noted that the "moralistic, therapeutic deism" that was so common among teenagers seemed to have followed diverse trajectories in the five years after high school. Emerging adults in the "Irreligious" group became more openly negative about religion than almost any teenagers had been. The category of spiritual seeking expanded. And those most committed to their religious traditions seemed to be more "clear and definite" about their faith than they had been during high school.[20] All of these changes are consistent with what developmental psychologists tell us about how developmental processes impact emerging adult religiosity. Emerging adults are engaged in identify formation and differentiation from their parents and are slowly constructing their own sense of meaning and purpose in life, often using current and past religious influences as some of the materials in those process. They are sorting through their religious beliefs and experiences and deciding which to keep, which to change and which to reject. This process is not always particularly active or conscious, but it is happening at some level for most emerging adults.[21]

Even these six religious types fall far short of capturing the variety of religious beliefs and practices among emerging adults. In a fascinating chapter on the religious attitudes of emerging adults, Smith and his research team identified 16 common themes and 4 less typical themes from their nationally representative sample of interviews with 18-23 year olds (See Table 1).[22] One set of these themes highlights what we have just said, religion was not very important to these emerging adults. Far from being threatened or angered by it, most were indifferent. When pushed to talk about their views on religion, most saw some good in it, especially the way religion teaches people to be good. Those raised in religious homes tended to see churches as "elementary schools of morals" that played an important role in making them who they are. Some said that they still believed everything they were taught, but those beliefs were not shaping their current decisions, behaviors or priorities much. And they did not typically see churches as primary places of belonging during this stage of their lives. Indeed, since one of their driving goals was to become independent, churches, like parents, were associated in their minds and feelings with the period of dependency they hoped to be leaving behind. Meanwhile, they rarely talked about religious matters with their friends, who were the people with whom they most strongly identified.[23]

A significant number of emerging adults in Smith's study took an individualistic, subjectivist approach to religious and moral beliefs. Their religious and moral beliefs came from their family or church and they tended to at least selectively retain the beliefs with which they were raised. A common refrain when they were pushed to justify their beliefs was "that's how I was raised." They assumed that whatever "feels" right to them is true in these matters. They were soft relativists in that they thought that the diverse religious and moral beliefs people hold might be "true for them." At the same time, they really did think some things were right and others were wrong, even though they could not explain why. They assumed that faith

is "blind" and that there is no real way to know for sure what is true when it comes to faith and morals. Religion is a personal matter. Even many of those for whom religion was personally important were quick to point out that each person just has to choose for themselves what to believe about faith matters.[24]

Views of religious truth and experience more in keeping with traditional orthodoxy were found to be what Smith and his fellow researchers called "less common themes." Fewer emerging adults expressed ideas that fit the theme "'My Faith is Really Important to Me," mentioned that they were "Close to God," affirmed that "Right and Wrong are Objectively Real" or claimed to believe that "Actually MY Religion is True."[25] These views were common enough to make the list of emerging adult beliefs, but they were professed by fewer interview subjects than the more prevalent indifferent, subjectivist, and "church is good for children" attitudes.

What Are the Causes of These Religious Patterns in the Lives of Emerging Adults?

Many different causes have been proposed by researchers to account for the changes in life patterns that have created emerging adulthood as a life stage. Similarly, a wide variety of factors have been cited as possibly shaping changes in emerging adult religiosity over time.[26] Almost all of the forces that researchers have so far suggested might be shaping emerging adult religiosity are either demographic or cultural in nature, and the demographic factors tend to be easier to empirically verify than the cultural influences. This treatment of the subject will be limited to factors shaping emerging adult religiosity that have been shown to have at least some empirical basis.

Religious Socialization

Empirical evidence suggests that ineffective religious socialization during adolescence is one factor that contributes to religious decline in emerging adulthood. For example Smith and his research colleagues found that teenagers with high levels of six faith sustaining factors in particular combinations were more likely to retain a stronger faith in early emerging adulthood. The most important factor was the faith of the parents. Of the six "paths" to strong emerging adult faith that Smith and his team identified, 4 paths included parents who said faith was very important to them and who attended church often. The other significant factors were that the teenagers said faith was very important to them, prayed and read the Bible often on their own, had many adults in their congregation to turn to for help, had many religious experiences, and had few doubts about their faith. Conversely, the NSYR statistical model showed that teenagers who seemed to be strong in faith during high school, but who experienced lower levels of these same factors were more likely to decline from high to low faith as emerging adults.[27]

The College Transition Project, also called the Sticky Faith study, found that "involvement in all-church worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation."[28] This finding at least implies that those who create separate youth worship services in order to hold onto youth are engaged in a short term measure that may lead to long term problems. Churches in

which adults made an effort to welcome and get to know teenagers and who invested in contacting them during their freshmen year of college also had better success in helping those young people maintain a strong faith.[29] Among the many ways that adults might nurture the faith of adolescents, the study found that students who during high school felt sought out by adults and who could affirm that those adults "helped me to realistically apply my faith to my daily life" fared better in college. The study also found that "attending retreats during high school was one of the few youth group activities independently correlated with Sticky Faith." In addition, students who had served as leaders of children's or middle school ministries while in high school tended to have stronger faith as college students. Teenagers tended to be stronger in their faith in college if they had grown up with parents who talked regularly with them about faith matters, and who shared about their own faith with their children.[30] Implicit in these various statistically significant teenage faith factors is the claim that when those factors are not present, or at least not present at sufficient levels, it becomes more likely that adolescents will experience a decline in their religiosity when they enter emerging adulthood.

The College Transition Project also found that particular deficits in adolescent religious socialization do lead to weaker emerging adult faith. Students who had engaged in religious practices during high school but had not internalized a maturing faith were more likely to drift away from their faith and engage in risky behaviors during college. They also found that a good many raised in church had weak or deficient understandings of the Gospel and tended to see the Christian faith as mainly about doing good things and avoiding bad things. Such teenagers typically wavered more in their faith in college.[31] Those who had been the best rule keepers but had the weakest understandings of grace typically fared the worst. In addition, when asked to rank five major sources of support, high school seniors ranked adults in their congregation far behind parents, youth workers, friends in youth group, and friends outside of youth group.[32] And although they very commonly reported liking their youth leaders, only one in five college students in the study believed, looking back, that that "my youth leaders really knew me."[33] When asked what they wished their church youth groups had provided more of, college freshmen most often said "time for deep conversation" suggesting that perhaps these students were now regretting not having learned more deeply about their faith when they had the chance. Relatedly, about 70% of the students in the study reported having religious doubts while in high school and would have liked to talk about those doubts with their youth leaders. Unfortunately, less than half of those students ever engaged in those conversations about their doubts with youth leaders or friends. The most common doubts tended to cluster around 4 topics: "1. Does God exist? 2. Does God love me? 3. Am I living the life God wants? 4. Is Christianity true/the only way to God?"[34] These findings suggest that some youth ministries could do better at providing opportunities for meaningful religious conversations, including safe spaces to talk about religious doubts.

The College Transition Project researchers also found that many students coming from church youth groups did not feel well prepared spiritually or practically for the transition to college. They wished that their youth leaders had provided more help so they could have felt readier to do things like find a church, deal with the relational intensity and temptations of the first couple of weeks on campus, and navigate the transition to living on their own and being more responsible for their time and money. They also wished that someone from their church

had kept in touch with them at least for a while at the beginning of college, and they observed that connecting with a church or on-campus Christian group was crucial in sustaining their faith.[35]

Finally, Kinnaman found several common complaints among young adults who had left the church which he summarizes using the terms "overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive, and doubtless." Some found churches overprotective, especially with regard to the arts and pop culture. Others thought church was boring and not well suited to preparing them for real life or helping them find their purpose. Others found the church to be anti-intellectual, and too full of people who thought they had all the answers. Some felt torn between the sexual practices of their peers and what felt to them like an overly repressive, unrealistic view of sex being promoted by their churches. Some had experienced being excluded from churches or religious organizations because of their beliefs or behaviors; others believed the church had unfairly hurt others in such ways. Some had experienced significant doubts and a few of them had not found either the help they needed or the freedom to speak about those doubts in their churches.[36] It is important to remember that the percentages of 18-29 year olds who grew up in church and who identified with these opinions were typically in the 10-20% range, meaning that these are minority experiences that do not necessarily account for the religious lives of the majority of emerging adults from religious backgrounds. Still, such experiences and opinions could be helping to populate the religious types that Smith labeled "Selective Adherents," "Indifferent" and "Irreligious."

Kinnaman found most of his research subjects to be "nomads" rather than "exiles" or "prodigals." Nomads are spiritual wanderers whose religious interest and involvement are sporadic. They have a mixture of positive and negative perceptions of the faith of their upbringing, but they are not particularly angry at the church and most still describe themselves as Christian. They have dropped out of church for various reasons, sometimes without thinking about it much, but they do not consider themselves to have left the faith. Nomads seem to share some characteristics with Smith's "Selective Adherents," but some Nomads might also be "Spiritual Seekers" or "Indifferent" at times. Kinnaman estimates that up to two fifths of all young people raised in church will go through a nomad period.[37] In contrast, prodigals define themselves quite clearly as no longer Christian and plan to hold quite firmly to their decision to leave the faith. Prodigals are much less common than nomads. It is likely that less than 10% of young people raised in church will ever become committed unbelievers or switch to a non-Christian religion.[38]

Kinnaman's typology probably makes its strongest contribution through his characterizations of the group he calls "exiles." xiles no longer feel at home in the church, most often because they believe the church is not doing what Jesus would want it to do for the world. In other cases, they feel their unique sense of vocation is not being supported or cannot fit into existing church structures or mentalities. Probably no more than 10% of emerging adults raised in church were becoming exiles at the time of Kinnaman's research. And like Nomads, many exiles had not really left the faith, even though they were less active in traditional church structures. Among Kinnaman's three types, exiles were most often interested in reconnecting with a faith community, but they wanted to see that community operate differently than the churches they had known in the past.[39] Other research on post-churched people generally

confirms Kinnaman's characterization of exiles, although other studies have tended to find exiles more among older age groups who have served for many years in the church.[40] Kinnaman's research methods did not allow him to precisely count the emerging adults in each of his three categories. Nevertheless, these religious types and their corresponding religious attitudes provide insights on some of the reasons that emerging adults may distance themselves from the church or from faith. And comparing Smith's typology with Kinnaman's suggests that emerging adult faith is dynamic. Individuals can and do move between types. Overall, we can say that childhood and adolescent religious socialization does significantly influence emerging adult religiosity, so that Arnett was wrong when he claimed that such socialization made no difference.[41]

Other Socialization

Smith and his research team found that American society is not preparing emerging adults to live healthy, productive lives in five important areas: moral reasoning, higher life purpose, substance use, sexuality, and civic engagement. First, they are unable to think clearly about moral matters. They can't say what makes some things right and others wrong. Second, they unquestioningly accept consumerism and the American Dream and do not typically articulate any other sense of life purpose or calling. The purpose of life for most is to have a good family and nice stuff. Third, many abuse alcohol, and a significant minority abuse drugs. Fourth, they do not hold a high view of sex as something powerful that should be treated with care. Most follow a pattern of serial monogamy and most romantic relationships involve sexual intercourse. Fifth, they do not participate in politics, community service, or charitable giving, though they hope to do these things someday. Smith and his fellow researchers insist that these deficits are largely caused by the failures of adult-led institutions such as schools, government agencies or even families.[42] Clearly these deficits impinge on religious belief and behavior at many points. People with values like these are unlikely to see religious beliefs, practices or communities as particularly important or valuable.

Sex and Family Formation Patterns

Many researchers believe that changing patterns of sexual activity and family formation are exerting the most powerful negative influences on religious involvement among emerging adults.[43] The rising average age of first marriage is especially significant. As Wuthnow documented around 2000, the percentages of people in their twenties delaying marriage and childbearing increased significantly between the 1970s and the early 21st century. And as it turns out, at least for people in their twenties, marital status is one of the most powerful predictors of church attendance. Never married emerging adults are even less likely to attend church regularly today than they were in the 1970s, while married people are about as likely to attend church today as in the past. When it comes to parenting, those with children continue to be more likely to attend church than those without children. Even the percentage of the childless who do not attend church has increased in recent decades. And the percentages of emerging adults who fall into these two categories (single and childless) has been increasing

over time. Being married with children while in one's twenties was the norm in the early 1970s, now that combination is much less common. Wuthnow believes that much of the decline of religious participation among people in their twenties and thirties can be attributed to these changing patterns of family formation.[44]

Of course this begs the question of why unmarried, childless emerging adults are less likely to attend church than those who are married with children. One hypothesis is that since women tend to be more interested in religion than men, getting married tends to pull some men into religious involvement who would have remained detached as singles.[45] Another hypothesis is that some people return to church as parents because they value the religious socialization their children will receive there.[46] Interviews with emerging adults confirm that many of them plan to return to church later for this reason.[47] In the meantime, the increase in the percentage of people in their twenties who are single and childless, and who therefore are absent from church, could easily be effecting popular perceptions that today's emerging adults are less religious than those of previous generations. It is impossible to predict what the effects will be as more and more emerging adults delay marriage and parenting. But it seems likely that an extending the period of life in which people are not attending church could contribute to fewer of them returning to church later. Indeed, this may be one of the mechanisms that is causing the slow decline of religious interest and involvement among successive cohorts of emerging adults.

Pre-marital sex, cohabitation, and the experience of being a single parent have all become more common over time among emerging adults.[48] Most people expect Christian churches to frown on these sexual behaviors, so emerging adults who have these life experiences tend to distance themselves from religious institutions and relationships. Smith and his fellow researchers argue that emerging adults who are involved in partying and sexual activity outside of marriage are not motivated to think about or practice their faith since that would only increase their discomfort with their current lifestyle or demand changes in it.[49]

Education and Economic Prospects

One of the less recognized demographic divides among emerging adults is between those who graduate from college and those who do not. Education levels effect not only church attendance, but religious beliefs. According to Wuthnow's research, those with more higher education, especially bachelor's degrees, were more likely to attend church than those with some or no college experience. And Wuthnow also found that non-college attenders had become less orthodox over time while college attenders had become more orthodox.[50] Although emerging adults as a group have low levels of confidence in mainstream institutions like churches, college graduates have greater confidence in institutions than emerging adults who never attended or never graduated from college.[51] Overall, the existing research does not confirm the common belief that attending college is harder on faith than not attending college.[52] In fact, college graduates tend to be more religious as a group than those who never attended college or who took only some college courses.

The majority of emerging adults do not graduate from college, and the shape of their lives does not encourage religious faith. A major research study funded by the MacArthur

Foundation examined the transition to adulthood and found that the transition differed significantly depending upon the type of community in which young people lived and the educational paths they took. One of the lead researches, Richard Settersten, identified two broad groups of emerging adults he called "treaders" and "swimmers." Swimmers are those emerging adults who go to college, get a degree, and take a bit longer to find a career, get married, and settle into adulthood. For them the longer period between leaving home and full, independent adulthood generally leads to good life outcomes. They lay a foundation for long term financial security and stronger marriages.[53] In contrast, treaders most often do not go to college or do not complete a degree. They may begin to have children and get stuck in low paying jobs. They too are taking a long time to achieve full adult status, but this delay is more like getting detoured than purposefully moving into a positive future. Treaders are in danger of never achieving financial security or a lasting marriage.[54]

The only exception here is that those who do not attend college sometimes get married earlier, which probably motivates some toward church involvement. But those marriages are sometimes unstable. And most emerging adults without college educations are delaying marriage indefinitely (although not always delaying parenting) because they do not believe their economic situation allows them to marry. Young men in this situation are particularly prone to believe that they must be able to provide for their family before getting married.[55]

Emerging adults who do not go to college have very different religious lives than those who do go to college. Multiple dimensions of their lives (sex, cohabitation, single parenting, partying, struggling economically) push against religious interest and involvement. On the other hand, Smith's research found that some emerging adults turned to religion to help them cope with devastating break ups, addictions, and other life traumas which are all too common in this life stage, and perhaps are even more common among the "treaders" than the "swimmers."[56]

Overall, social scientists have not adequately studied the lives of emerging adults who are not college students. At the 2015 meeting of the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood, several plenary speakers admitted this to be the case, and some called on researchers to stop making claims about all emerging adults when their research sample included only college students.[57] A further difficulty for understanding emerging adults with little or no college experience is that they are probably even more diverse in their life experiences than college students and so they may further subdivide into several "tribes." For example, the young couple with manufacturing jobs who get married young might be more likely to be involved in church than the single mother who struggling to work two low paying jobs and attend community college part time. Missionaries need to pay much more attention to the tribe (or tribes) of those who do not go to college and especially to the subgroup that is struggling financially.

Life Experiences and Cultural Beliefs

Even a quick comparison of the two columns in Table 1 suggests many possible ways that the life experiences and cultural beliefs of emerging adults may shape their religious beliefs and behaviors. Using this evidence, Smith and his research team identified several mechanisms

that they believed to be shaping the patterns of religiosity found among emerging adults. Some of these mechanisms, such as the influence of delayed marriage and childbearing and the influence of pre-marital sex and cohabitation have already been discussed. Most of these mechanisms exert a negative influence on emerging adult religiosity.

First, life disruptions and distractions have been shown by many studies to decrease church involvement, and emerging adult lives are full of both. People of all ages experience disruptions and distractions, but emerging adults experience a lot of them over a sustained period of time and with little personal experience or social support to help. Their main advisors and confidants are fellow emerging adults who are often struggling just as mightily to get their lives to work. As a result, emerging adults may be more likely than older adults to get overwhelmed or absorbed by life transitions like moving to a new city, starting a new job, ending a romantic relationship, etc…[58]

Second, emerging adults experience developmental processes of differentiation from their parents and identity formation and those processes can cause them to re-evaluate and change their religious beliefs or practices. In theory, these processes could lead to a reaffirmation of the faith of one's childhood, and that does happen for some.[59] But given that so many of the influences in emerging adult lives push in the other direction, it becomes common for emerging adults to become less religious or to change their religious views. Smith even argues that since many emerging adults see religious beliefs as relatively unimportant matters of personal preference, the realm of religion becomes a low cost arena in which to carve out a sense of identity that is distinct from their parents.[60]

Third, emerging adults value keeping their options open and are wary of making commitments too soon that will close down future possibilities. Since religious institutions typically promote commitment to a set of beliefs and practices and expect their members to live moral lives, emerging adults sense that religious involvement will prevent them from experimenting, having fun, and keeping their options open.[61]

Fourth, since emerging adults assume that religious particularities are relatively unimportant, and want to honor diversity without being judgmental of anyone, they tend to see religion as a generic resource that is not very important in their current life circumstances. Their soft relativism tends to undermine the importance of religion in their lives.[62]

Fifth, since emerging adults place a high value on achieving self-sufficiency and most feel they are on the verge of achieving it, they do not have a high felt need for the resources that religion can provide. If they are going to "stand on their own" then they will need to do so without the help of religion or religious institutions[63].

Sixth, since morality is self-evident and perhaps relative to the person or situation, and since religious institutions are mainly seen as sources of moral training for children, emerging adults do not see much need for religion in their lives right now. Many plan to return to church someday.[64]

In addition to the mechanisms identified by Smith, other researchers have found that emerging adults have lower confidence in institutions like church and government than older Americans, and some believe that emerging adult confidence in institutions has declined in recent decades.[65] If emerging adults are not inclined to trust public institutions that could be contributing to distancing themselves from church. Interestingly, even highly religious

emerging adults seem to share a mix of negative and positive views of churches and Christians.[66] That confusion or ambivalence toward the church could also be contributing to the tendency to be a "nomad" or "selective adherent" rather than a "committed traditionalist."

Only two possible mechanisms that Smith identified might push emerging adults toward religion. Those who battle through difficult life experiences such as break ups, addictions, negative sexual experiences, or death of loved ones are sometimes motivated to turn to religious resources for help. And those who have strong, positive relationships with parents who are highly religious can be motivated to consider faith or to keep investing in their faith during emerging adulthood.[67] Most likely there are other mechanisms that contribute to strong emerging adult religiosity that Smith's research did not identify. The point here is that when they interviewed emerging adults ages 18 to 23 about their life experiences and cultural beliefs, the NSYR researchers could find little in their lives that seemed likely to support religious interest and involvement. The life circumstances and cultural beliefs of emerging adults mostly discourage faith and religious involvement.

Making Disciples among Emerging Adults

What are the missiological implications of this religious diversity among emerging adults? The many factors pushing or pulling emerging adults away from religion require us to see this group of tribes as extremely difficult to reach with the Gospel. Careful study, incisive strategy, committed, long term missionaries, and the power of the Holy Spirit will be needed for effective missionary efforts among this population. Although we have much to learn about the religious lives of emerging adults, what we know so far suggests two important missional considerations. First, missionaries should shape their disciple making strategies among emerging adults to fit the most common characteristics of individuals in this life stage. Second, we can distinguish several "tribes" of emerging adults based on key demographic, cultural, and religious variables. Each of these people groups is worthy of further study so that missionaries can make disciples among them in culturally appropriate ways.

Disciple Making in Light of the Most Common Traits of Emerging Adults

The most common trait shared by almost all emerging adults is a life full of transitions which will someday lead to full adult status. These transitions and learning to stand on their own, combined with intense peer relationships and the cultural imperatives of having fun and exploring new experiences easily consume all of the time, energy and attention that emerging adults have available. Yet a significant minority say they are interested in learning more about faith matters. As a result, missionaries to emerging adults must find creative ways to capture some of their attention, most likely working through peer relational networks. In addition, missionaries need to find ways to demonstrate to emerging adults that the relationships and activities that consume their lives can be transformed by the grace of God. Seminars and mentoring programs aimed at helping emerging adults through various life transitions and key decisions can be an effective way to begin relationships that could lead to disciple making.

Most emerging adults have good relationships with their parents, but are seeking to renegotiate a more independent, adult relationship with them. As part of differentiation from their parents, they are either actively or passively changing their religious beliefs and practices. All this is part of their ongoing identity exploration, which includes groping their way toward some sense of meaning and purpose in life. Very many are not very clear on their purpose, or have settled for "the American dream" as their default life purpose. They are ambivalent about whether they can make a difference for good in the world and whether that difference can begin now. All of these factors point toward the value of engaging in conversations and service experiences that help emerging adults explore a sense of vocation and purpose in life. Faith conversations that focus on questions like "What do *you* believe and why?" and "What difference can following Jesus make in your life?" can be especially helpful to emerging adults and can provoke them to be revise their religious beliefs and practices more responsibly and with greater intellectual and emotional integrity.

Many emerging adults are unmarried, and a large majority have engaged in pre-marital sex. Most emerging adults view church as a place for younger people or older, married people with children. And those who engage in sexual activity or other sinful behaviors typically do not attend church due to cognitive dissonance or fears of being judged. Missionaries need to find ways to engage emerging adults in faith conversations that do not require church attendance and do not imply that only the celibate are welcome in the conversation. Most emerging adults need help seeing how faith is relevant to their current single state of life. And once the friendship with a trusted Christian friend gets deep enough, emerging adults who are having sex need help figuring out how to get out of the mess they have created. Many will need help receiving sexual healing and assurance of forgiveness, not just teaching on why sex outside of marriage is wrong. Churches will need to provide positive teaching, relational support, theological grounding for extended, celibate single life.[68] Regnerus and Uecker suggest that middle-class parents and their emerging adult children should get over their prejudice against "early" marriage, since research on the effects of age at first marriage suggests that those who marry in their early twenties are not at significant increased risk for divorce.[69] Ironically, many emerging adults are convinced that cohabitation is a great way to get ready for marriage, when in fact, it is much more detrimental to having a lasting, healthy marriage than is getting married in one's early twenties.[70]

Many emerging adults have been influenced by negative views of the church and Christians. They are sensitive to ways that Christians have not lived up to their own ideals and will need help finding ways to love the church, not just to love Jesus. They have trouble trusting most adult-led institutions, including the church. Especially for those who hold negative views of the church or of Christians, attending a church service or church program will most likely come only after extensive relational ministry outside of traditional church activities. Becoming a disciple will most happen outside the walls of the church. But eventually, these emerging adult disciples will need to be taught about the crucial place of the church in God's plan of salvation. They will need a deeper, more realistic ecclesiology that can help them love the church despite her flaws. They will need to discover that the parachurch organizations or informal religious discussion groups that they find so life giving only exist and are good because the church exists and is good.

Many emerging adults hold various forms of "soft relativism" when it comes to religious and moral truths. For some who are intellectually oriented, addressing the contradictions and flaws in this way of thinking about truth could be an effective part of disciple making. More often, relational evangelism and learning to live in community with other disciples will take place first. Once a young person has an experiential relationship with Christ and is growing as a disciple, he or she will still need to be better instructed about Christian views of truth and morality. In addition, emerging adult disciples will need help seeing how it is possible to believe some things to be true and others to be false without becoming harsh, intolerant or judgmental. They need to learn how to engage in helpful conversations with others who are immersed in a pluralistic, relativistic culture.

Perhaps most importantly, a large percentage of emerging adults do not understand and have not fully experienced the Gospel. They view the faith in largely moralistic and instrumental terms. They think faith and church are good for training children in morals. Many also believe that faith can also help one cope with life's challenges by providing positive experiences of feeling close to God. Further, they tend to believe that good people go to heaven, and most people are good. This moralism probably contributes to the ease with which emerging adults judge churches and Christians for not being morally perfect. Emerging adults need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and encounter Jesus through conversion and discipleship. We are not saved because we are good, we are saved by the grace of God received as a free gift through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel is the power of God that both begins and sustains our salvation and ongoing transformation in Christ. Missionaries need to find creative, compelling ways to proclaim and live the Gospel in ways that challenge the moralism and indifference of many emerging adults. An interesting theological question to ponder is, "what might it mean to be 'all things to all people' when it comes to today's emerging adults?" Paul found a way to adapt without compromising his understanding of Law and Gospel (1 Corinthians 9). Missionaries to emerging adults need to do the same today. But how they answer that question may depend upon which "tribe" of emerging adults they hope to reach with the Gospel.

Emerging Adult Tribes

There is no typology that can fully capture the many different possible combinations of traits that characterize emerging adults' religiosity. And the terms "tribe" or "people group" can only be used analogically when describing groups of emerging adults with similar religious orientations. Even though emerging adults sometimes sort themselves into friend groups with similar religious orientations[71], the lived reality of "membership" in the kind of "tribe" described in this paper does not carry the same kind of conscious group identity and solidarity as one might find in an ethic group or indigenous tribal group. This lack of tribal identity is especially important when considering groups characterized by less engagement with religion. For such "tribes" religion is not a significant part of personal or group identity. Even the most religious emerging adults do not necessarily perceive themselves to be in the same "tribe"; rather they might identify more with a particular church or tradition, such as Catholic or African American church. Despite these limitations, the analogical use of terms like "tribe" or

"people group" can help us remember that different types of emerging adults need different mission strategies. Keeping this religious diversity clearly in view can also motivate us to do the work to identify those different strategies.

An additional complicating factor in trying to identify emerging adult "tribes" is that there are three key factors that cut across tribes and also seem to highly influence emerging adult religiosity: marital status, educational experiences, and affective connection to religion. These factors may in some cases be more important in shaping an individual's religious beliefs and practices than membership in a "tribe" like the ones that have been identified by researchers like Smith and Kinnaman. Further research may find that one of these factors actually shapes a more significant "tribe" than the ones that have thus far been identified. So each of the "tribes" below could potentially be further divided based on whether the emerging adults in question are married or single, college educated or not, and have a positive affective connection to religion or not. Before moving on to the "tribes" let's examine each of these key factors and their possible contributions to emerging adult religious identity and practice.

With regard to marital status, it is not clear whether getting married constitutes a transition from emerging adulthood into young adulthood. That question in turn is shaped by the larger debate about whether emerging adulthood is really a new developmental life stage or not.[72] For our missional purposes, it is important to note that marital status may be more important to an emerging adult's openness to becoming a disciple of Jesus than almost any other factor. If true, this means that missionaries will need to create distinct strategies and environments to make disciples among emerging adults based on whether those emerging adults are married or single.

Educational achievement and economic prospects profoundly shape the religious lives of emerging adults. Those with less education and more precarious economic prospects are less religious than those with better life prospects. Neither the social science literature nor the Christian ministry literature have adequately studied the less-educated and less upwardly mobile majority group among emerging adults and this needs to change.

Previous religious typologies of emerging adults have not taken adequately integrated what we know about the variations in affective connection to religion. As noted above, some religious traditions seem to do better at helping adolescents and emerging adults find and maintain a positive affective connection to their faith, but exactly why this is so and how it works has not yet been fully explained. For our purposes, the evidence suggest that there are a good many emerging adults who are connecting emotionally with God in various ways but who do not fit into Smith's "Committed Traditionalist" type. Though they may differ in other dimensions of their current religious orientation, this group that is experiencing God is ripe for disciple making. Meanwhile, those emerging adults with less affective connection to God either in their background or their current experience or both, are less ripe for disciple making. It may be that if further research is done on the affective dimension of emerging adult religiosity, we will find that experiences that create a sense of affective connection to God end up being more important than other factors that we currently use to identify emerging adult religious "tribes."

By synthesizing existing religious typologies and doing what we can to incorporate considerations of marital status, educational attainment, and affective connection to God, it is possible to identify the following religious "tribes" of emerging adults. These tribes are listed in

descending order of their likely openness to becoming disciples of Jesus. For each tribe, initial suggestions are provided regarding disciple making among that group.

Transitioning Believers

This tribe corresponds to Smith's "Committed Traditionalists" but the name change is intended to communicate that Smith may have overstated how "committed" or "traditional" many in this group really are. In particular, even those who attend church regularly and say their faith is very important to them are still in a major life transition that will have a significant impact on the future shape of their faith. Still, this group is doing exceptionally well, especially given the many forces that are pulling their peers away from faith. More research needs to be done to identify the factors during emerging adulthood that contribute to these positive religious outcomes. In light of the typical evangelical Christian goals for discipleship, several problems are likely to occur even in this group. Smith noted that even "Committed Traditionalists" tended to take an individualistic, compartmentalized approach to their faith.[73] Some evidence suggests that even strongly Christian emerging adults might be influenced by soft relativism and religious subjectivism. At the very least they might be confused about the difference between public civility and relativism.[74] In addition, this group might also struggle to align their sense of life purpose with their faith. And a good many are struggling in various ways with integrating their faith with their sexual lives. Missionaries working with emerging adults in this tribe need to teach about finding one's vocation in light of the Gospel and the biblical narrative of redemption. They will also need to help emerging adults give all dimensions of their lives to Christ – life purpose, sexuality and friendships being among the most salient. Learning better moral reasoning and a critique of religious and moral relativism will also help these disciples of Jesus stand firm against the many influences that push them to privatize and trivialize their beliefs. Finally, given the ambivalence about the church that many in this group experience, they will need help learning a better ecclesiology that helps them grapple with the church's failings while still upholding the importance of the church in God's plan of redemption. This tribe is also ripe for being trained to disciple others.

Wavering Believers

This group includes some of Smith's "Selective Adherents" and some of Kinnaman's "Nomads." It probably also includes some who are having or have had powerful affective experiences in the faith, but who are not currently well connected to the church. The term "Wavering" is meant to emphasize the instability of this group and the fragility of their faith. Many in this group have had some form of Christian upbringing, but their Christian beliefs and behaviors are not faring well under the onslaught of the "perfect storm" of emerging adulthood. This group will need missionaries who will go to where they are and build trusting, dialogical relationships in their environments. Ideally, those relationships would include more than just one on one mentoring, but also small communities of people exploring faith together and learning to support one another in it. Members of this tribe will need even more help than the "Transitioning Believers" in understanding what Christians believe and why they believe it.

They will probably be heavily influenced by religious relativism and subjectivism and strongly tempted to believe that faith is for some later period in their lives. Members of this tribe may be especially likely to find themselves living in an unresolved tension between their religious beliefs and their current behaviors with regard to sex and alcohol. And over time, some will resolve the tension by distancing themselves even further from their childhood faith. Biblical resources that might be especially useful with this group include Jesus' calls to discipleship, such as the story of the rich young ruler, and the parable of the lost son (Lk 15). Jesus' encounters with people in need such as the woman with the flow of blood or Bartimaeus could also speak powerfully to these emerging adults who are struggling to hold onto their faith.

Seekers

This group is small and is often seeking something other than traditional Christianity. However, some in this tribe might be open to re-examining Christian faith or exploring a Christian tradition different from the one in which they were raised. Kinnaman's exiles probably fit here, as do some of his nomads. Missionaries to this tribe will need to focus on new, creative ways to present Christian spirituality and Christian truth. They will want to focus on biblical material such as a fresh encounter with Jesus in the Gospels and stories of unusual believers from the Old Testament such as Naaman, Balaam, the Ninevites who repented after Jonah preached to them.

The Unreached

The members of this tribe have little or no experience with church or Christianity. They are unable to say much of anything about religion and what it means to them. Smith called this group "disconnected" but the term "unreached" fits better with our missional focus. This tribe has not been well studied by social scientists. And they have also not been a high priority among Christian leaders who have framed the emerging adult faith problem as a problem of retention. Unreached emerging adults have never been Christians and in many cases really know little about it. Presumably some are open to learning more, and some are not, but we do not know which subgroup is larger. Given the emerging class divide in American religiosity and marital status, it is likely that this tribe has a high proportion of unmarried "treaders" with shaky economic prospects. Just as there is generational poverty, and generational patterns of remaining unmarried, there is probably an emerging generational pattern of disconnection from Christian faith. Another subgroup of the Unreached might be emerging adults raised by post-churched, middle-class boomer parents. Whether they are "swimmers" or "treaders" the Unreached need missionaries who will search for them and get to know them and their culture (or cultures). We know far too little about this people group to know how to reach them with the Gospel.

The Indifferent

This group will be hard to reach unless relationship with a Christian friend goes deep and a life crisis creates a felt need. Missionaries need to build pre-evangelistic friendships with this group so that when the crisis comes or the Spirit moves, they will be present to help these formerly indifferent emerging adults meet Jesus. Stories of Jesus meeting people at their point of need such as the story of Bartimaeus could help the indifferent realize the spiritual longings that they have repressed. Probing questions about life purpose and moral beliefs could also push the indifferent to reconsider the importance of faith, but only if the friendship can bear it. Interacting with a healthy group of Christian friends will probably be an especially important first step toward faith for the members of this tribe. They will most likely begin to belong to a group of Christian friends before they believe.

The Alienated

This tribe will be the hardest to reach since they are suspicious of the church and skeptical of Christian beliefs. Smith's "Irreligious" and Kinnaman's "Prodigals" fit here. Among the most difficult to reach in this tribe are those who have made a rejection of Christianity central to their identities. But it is important to remember that not all members of this tribe have entrenched themselves in such an extreme position. And even some who believe themselves to be committed unbelievers may be assuming a developmental posture that is not the final word. As was the case with the Indifferent tribe, missionaries to the alienated will need to build a foundation of friendship. Members of this tribe will probably not want to actively explore Christian faith, but they might respond favorably to sincere inquiries about how and why they have reached their current views about Christianity. And they would then be open to a reciprocal sharing of personal testimony from a Christian friend. As with the indifferent, contact with an attractive Christian relational environment could be a key pre-evangelistic experience for members of this tribe. When those friendships reach a point at which a member of the alienated tribe is more open to discussing the faith, a focus on Jesus' rebukes of the Pharisees or his other radical teachings could find some resonance. The alienated might be surprised to learn that Jesus reserved some of his harshest language for religious people. As with the indifferent, a member of the Alienated tribe may need to experience a significant life change or even a crisis before he or she becomes open to exploring Jesus with a trusted Christian friend.

It is important to remember that emerging adults can move between these tribes over time. The evidence we have suggests that religious beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes are more dynamic during emerging adulthood than they were in adolescence or will be in later stages of adulthood. When emerging adults do switch "tribes" those movements tend to be connected to one or more of the following: peer relationships, difficult life experiences, or powerful religious experiences.

Effective disciple making among emerging adults will also require re-imagining how to fund that mission. As with any new mission field or unreached people group that has almost no indigenous, reproducing leaders, sending churches will need to fund full time cross-cultural missionaries. The reigning economic paradigm in local churches is that full time paid staff members lead programs that take place in the church building or at least quickly result in

people attending church services. But this financial model is not promising for reaching emerging adults who are among the least likely of all age groups to attend church, even when they say faith is important to them.

Parachurch college ministries have long used the model of personal support raising to fund missionaries to emerging adults. But recent research shows that such approaches to fund raising put minority leaders at a disadvantage.[75] In addition, parachurch college ministries may or may not succeed in connecting emerging adults with a local church. Most significantly, the parachurch model has yet to be used to any significant extent with the majority of emerging adults who do not attend college. And it is not clear that this funding model could be used effectively to reach that group due to the differential investment that families and communities tend to make in their bright stars, as compared to their ordinary kids.[76] Perhaps one reason why emerging adults who do not go to college are especially underrepresented in churches is that the church has not invested financially in reaching them the way we have invested in college students and high school students. But at this point, non-collegiate emerging adults may be one of the least churched groups in America and innovative strategies and funding approaches need to be developed to reach them with the Gospel.

Our brief, initial map of these tribes suggests that disciple making movements that enter emerging adult social spaces and work through emerging adult social networks seem more promising than missional strategies that require them to come to church as a first step. As with any pioneering mission work, missionaries will need to build relationships that take time and there will be lots of starts and stops in the process of making disciples. Investing in the lives of emerging adults may not always seem to produce quick, visible kingdom results. Emerging adults will move in and out of friendships with Christians because their lives are dominated by geographic, relational, educational, economic and religious instability. Nevertheless, as with any unreached people group, persistent love and proclamation of the truth of the Gospel over time will produce a harvest in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Table 1. Common Themes in the Lives of Emerging Adults, 18-23 (2007-2008)[77]

Themes in EA Lives	**Themes in EA Religious Views**
Transitions, Transitions, Transitions	Not a Very Threatening topic
Standing on One's Own	*Less Typical:* I Have No Idea [about religion]
So Much to Figure Out	Indifferent
Don't Have Enough Money	The Shared Central Principles of Religions are Good
Optimism for Their Personal Future	Religious Particularities are Peripheral
Less Typical: Struggling to be Optimistic	*Less Typical:* Actually, MY Religion Is True
Smarting from Hard Lessons Learned	Religion is for Making Good People
No Regrets	Religious Congregations are Elementary Schools of Morals
Less Typical: Overcoming Major Obstacles	Family's Faith is Associated With Dependence
Relationships with Parents Improving	*Less Typical:* "My Faith" Is Really Important to Me
Less Typical: Ongoing Problems with Parents	[Church] Not a Place of Real Belonging
Hard to See an Objective Reality Beyond the Self	Friends Hardly Talk about Religion
Right and Wrong Are Easy [to identify]	Religious Beliefs are Cognitive Assents, Not Life Drivers
Not Hurting Others is Self-Evident	"What Seems Right to Me" Is Authority
Karma Will Catch You	Take or leave What You Want [from religion]
Everybody's Different	Evidence and Truth Trump "Blind Faith"
It's Up to the Individual	*Less Typical:* I'm Open to Some Kind of Higher Power
More Open-Minded	Mainstream Religion is Fine, Probably
All Cultures Are Relative	*Less Typical:* Mainstream Religion is a Problem
Relative Morality Depends on the Case	*Less Typical:* Close to God
Less Typical: Rights and Wrongs are Objectively Real	[Religion is] Personal—Not Social or Institutional
Uncertain Purpose	There is No Way to Finally Know What's True
Education is of Instrumental Value	
Drugs are Pervasive, but Maybe Getting Boring	
Settling Down is for Later	
Less Typical: Babies Change Everything	
Relationships are Often Amorphous	
Hooking Up Is Common	
Devastating Breakups Happen	
Cohabit to Avoid Divorce	
Strategically Managing Risks	
Less Typical: Risks are Best Avoided Altogether	
Less Typical: I've Got a Major Addiction	
Consumerism is Good Stuff	
Helping Others Is an Optional Personal Choice	
Less Typical: We're Responsible for Each Other	
The Middle-class Dream Alive and Well	
Still Believe in America's Freedoms	
Less Typical: America Has Major Problems	
Volunteering and Giving Someday, Maybe	
Don't Expect to Change the World	
Less Typical: We Can Change the World	
Submerge in Interpersonal Relationships	
It's Too Easy to Fall Back into Old Ways	

1. See for example, Timothy Paul Jones, ed. *Perspectives on Family Ministry: 3 Views* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009); David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).
2. Jonathan P. Hill, *Emerging Adulthood and Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College Press, 2015), 4-20; Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 88-102; William B. Whitney and Pamela Ebstyne King, "Religious Congregations and Communities" in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality: Meaning Making in an Age of Transition,* ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 133-151; Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton 2007), 51-53.
3. Two examples of this approach are Paul Renfro, "Family-Integrated Ministry: Family-Driven Faith" in *Perspectives on Family Ministry* ed. Timothy Paul Jones (Nashville, TN, B & H Academic, 2009), 54-78 and Brian Cosby, "The Reformed View of Youth Ministry" in *Youth Ministry in the Twenty-First Century: Five Views,* ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 37-52.
4. Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 15.
5. Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 15-20, 22-24.
6. Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox and Thomas Banchoff, *A Generation in Transition: Religion, Values and Politics among College-Age Millennials* (Public Religion Research Institute, Georgetown University, 2012), 7-8, Accessed August 15, 2016 from http://www.prri.org/research/millennial-values-survey-2012/
7. Jean M. Twenge, Julie J. Exline, Joshua B. Grubbs, Ramya Sastry, W. Keith Campbell, "Generational and Time Period Differences in American Adolescents' Religious Orientation, 1966-2014" *PLoS ONE* 10(5) DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0121454
8. Twenge, et. al. "Generational and Time Period Differences"
9. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 108-11.
10. Michael A. Hout, Andrew Greeley and Melissa J. Wilde, "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States" *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (Sept. 2001): 468-500. James A. Mathison, "Tell Me Again: Why Do Churches Grow?" *Books and Culture* (May/June 2004): 18-20, 41.
11. Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 24-26. For further analysis of young adult church attendance, see Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers,* 51-70. Wuthnow finds a decline in church attendance over time, but does not distinguish between religious groups in his analysis.
12. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 112-25.
13. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 115-18.
14. Sociologist David Hout tends to agree that these high numbers probably mean that the survey respondents thought they were being asked about how often they have conversations about religion, not about how often they try to persuade friends to switch to their religion. See

David Masci, "Q & A: Why Millennials are Less Religious Than Older Americans" *Fact Tank,* Pew Research Center (Jan 8, 2016), Accessed Aug 15, 2016 from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/

15. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 115-18.
16. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 113-15, 125-28.
17. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 166-68.
18. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 220.
19. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 166-68.
20. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 154-56.
21. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, "Emerging Adults' Religious and Spiritual Development" in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality* ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21-38.
22. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 143-65.
23. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 144-54. But note that Wuthnow found that people in their 20s talked quite often with their friends about religion. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 119. This difference could be a change over time since Wuthnow used research findings from the late 1990s, while Smith's research was done in 2007-2008.
24. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 156-64.
25. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 52, 147, 151, 162.
26. For lists of possible factors influencing emerging adult religion, see Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, eds. *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 20-26; Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 75-87, 282-297; Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 20-50.
27. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 211-56.
28. Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 75.
29. Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 77-78.
30. Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 118.
31. Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 29-30.
32. Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 77.
33. Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 140.
34. Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 143-44.
35. Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 165-67.
36. Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 91-198.
37. Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 59-65.
38. Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 66-70.
39. Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 73-88.
40. Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2000); Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees* (Group Publishing, 2015).
41. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 174-177.

42. For detailed descriptions of each of these problem areas see Christian Smith with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
43. Although this section will rely heavily on the work of Wuthnow, sexuality and delayed family formation are some of the most cited causes of low emerging adult religiosity. See Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 26; Smith *Souls in Transition*, 79, 83-84. Numerous studies also document that even emerging adults with reasonably strong faith struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs and their sexual behaviors. See Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2008; Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate and Think about Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Tara M. Stoppa, Graciela Espinoza-Hernandez and Meghan M. Gillen "The Roles of Religiousness and Spirituality in the Sexual Lives of Heterosexual Emerging Adults" in in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality* ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 186-203.
44. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 54-62.
45. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 54.
46. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 56-58.
47. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 14, 79, 149-150, 173, 193, 197, 200-201, 206, 208.
48. Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America,* 169-204; Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 21-28, 136-39.
49. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 83-84.
50. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 60-62, 107-108.
51. Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 22.
52. Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 29-46; Perry L. Glanzer, Jonathan Hill and Todd C. Ream, "Changing Souls: Higher Education's Influence Upon the Religious Lives of Emerging Adults" in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality* ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 152-167.
53. Richard Settersten and Barbara E. Ray, *Not Quite Adults: Why 20-Somethings are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood and Why It's Good for Everyone* (New York: Bantam, 2010), ix-xxiii, 3-28, 77-101. The subtitle of the book is actually misleading. Settersten thinks that the majority of emerging adults are in trouble; they are "treaders" not "swimmers." For the scholarly research that supports the conclusions in *Not Quite Adults*, see Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank Furstenberg, Jr. and Ruben G. Rumbaut, eds. *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
54. Settersten, *Not Quite Adults*, 29-101.
55. Settersten, *Not Quite Adults*, 77-101.
56. Smith, *Souls in Transition,* 84-85.
57. See for example, Seth Schwartz, "Unanswered Questions about Emerging Adulthood: An Agenda for Moving the Field Forward" unpublished presentation at the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood, October 16, 2015, http://ssea.org/conference/2015/presidentialaddress.htm and Moin Syed, Moderator, "Debating

Emerging Adulthood: Jeffrey Arnett on the Hot Seat" Panel discussion at the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood, October 16, 2015 http://ssea.org/conference/2015/hotseat.htm.
58. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 75-78.
59. Barry and Abo-Zena, "Emerging Adults' Religious and Spiritual Development," 21-34.
60. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 78-79.
61. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 79-80.
62. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 80-83.
63. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 81-82.
64. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 82-83.
65. Twenge, et. al. "Generational and Time Period Differences"; Hill, *Emerging Adulthood*, 22.
66. Jones, Cox and Banchoff, *Generation in Transition*, 31-33, Accessed August 15, 2016 from http://www.prri.org/research/millennial-values-survey-2012/
67. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 84-87.
68. See, for example, Christine A. Colon and Bonnie E. Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).
69. Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, 175-181, 248-249
70. Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, 199-204.
71. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 129-131.
72. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Marion Kloep, Leo B. Hendry and Jennifer L. Tanner, Debating Emerging Adulthood: Stage or Process? (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); James E. Côté, "The Dangerous Myth of Emerging Adulthood: An Evidence-Based Critique of a Flawed Developmental Theory" *Applied Developmental Science 18*:4 (2014): 177-88.
73. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 166-167.
74. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 48-53, 145-146, 156-157, 162-164; Smith et. al. *Lost in Transition*, 19-69.
75. Daniel White Hodge and Pablo Otaola, "Reconciling the Divide: The Need for Contextual and Just Models of Fundraising in Vocational Youth Ministry" *The Journal of Youth Ministry* (Fall 2016), forthcoming.
76. Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, "Straight from the Heartland: Coming of Age in Ellis, Iowa" in *Coming of Age in America: The Transition to Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mary C. Waters, Patrick J. Carr, Maria J. Kefalas and Jennifer Holdaway (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 28-58.
77. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 33-75, 143-65.