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Emerging Adult Transitions: Clarifying Where Young Adults Need the Most Support

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Abstract

Over the past twenty-five years, the discourse around emerging adulthood has become more nuanced as factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, orientation, education, family systems, socioeconomic status, spirituality, etc., impact emerging adults' experiences. What appears critical throughout are the distinct yet often shared experiences emerging adults encounter as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. Through our research at the Fuller Youth Institute, generously funded by Lilly Endowment, we have embarked on a four-year study to identify and understand the most prevalent transitions emerging adults in the United States encounter as they negotiate increasingly undefined paths from adolescence to adulthood.

We conducted a literature review on emerging adults and transitions, identifying seven key transitions among emerging adults, with the frequency and degree of these transitions varying depending on one's identity and context. This conceptual framework permitted us to survey a nationally representative sample of 1,044 emerging adults in the United States who self-identify as Christian and report experiencing a significant shift or change in their twenties. Currently, we are conducting follow-up interviews with 50 survey participants. We speculate that our emerging findings on young adult transition experiences began to clarify the often-vague views and misunderstood journeys emerging adults travel toward adulthood. A clearer view can capture new narratives that better represent emerging adults, inspiring more compassionate,

creative, and courageous ministry that offers good news where young adults say they need the most support.

Introduction

Youth ministry educators and leaders know that preparing leaders and congregations for youth ministry requires more than simply focusing on teenagers. Research about human development and findings regarding individual and communal faith formation have broadened youth ministry's view to consider what supporting young people means for high school graduates into their twenties. Popular literature and some Christian resourcers have sounded the alarm about emerging/young[1] adults leaving the church and are quick to blame emerging adults for the downturn. While Christian emerging adults are responsible for their actions, most commentary on their church engagement fails to appreciate the third decade of life emerging adults are negotiating. Institutions, including faith communities' misguided assumptions, often leave churches and youth ministries operating out of ignorance and passivity, rendering them irrelevant to young adults they intend to engage. Before congregations attempt new or renewed approaches, more reliable perspectives are needed to understand emerging adults' lives and faith journeys to help them with their agency and assist faith communities in supporting them. A renewed perspective fueled by empathy and understanding can evoke possibilities that support young adults with good news where they seek it most.

From 2016-2021, the Fuller Youth Institute invested in research on emerging adults and congregations, generously funded by Lilly Endowment's Young Adult Initiative. Ministry Innovations *with* Young Adults (MIYA) findings drew from our work with over 40 churches, hundreds of ministry leaders, and thousands of young adults. We focused on three guiding concepts. First, *innovation* (rooted in practical theology) sought to jumpstart congregations'

[1] While church settings often use the term "young adult" to describe those in their twenties, most academic research on those in their third decade of life are called "emerging adults." More description will be offered, but these terms may be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

imaginations toward who young adults are, what is good news to them, and what kind of support churches can offer.[2] Second, the operative word "with" in Ministry Innovations *with* Young Adults emphasized the intentionally collaborative and relational posture in which ministry innovation should take place for emerging adults to develop agency in their formation. Third, *Christian practices* connected innovation and "with" to the best of our Christian traditions, emphasizing that faith formation needs a relational and habitual process to help young adults clarify their quests for identity, belonging, and purpose (IBP). Our work surfaced a need for a more intentional understanding of what Christian young adults experience and seek, through empathy and dialogue, more commitment to encouraging and honoring emerging adults' agency in their lives and spiritual journeys, which requires more supportive and responsive ministry versus prescriptive demands;[3] and a renewed approach to Christian practices that serve young adults and their in-motion lives.[4] These research and training takeaways allowed us to be more descriptive about young adults' experiences and how their journeys from adolescence to adulthood impact their formation and formational needs. Since then, FYI was awarded a second grant by Lilly Endowment to extend our learnings and consider how faith communities and ministries can be resourced to support young adults. This current 4-year grant is called Discipleship Initiatives *with* Young Adults (DIYA).

DIYA expands upon this work to help congregations strategically and more comprehensively support young adults' faith journeys. Based on our MIYA work and previous literature reviews, we understand that emerging adults (ages 18 to 29) are in a season of

[2] FYI contextualized design thinking processes and methods for churches, crafting an innovation process that FYI published as *Sticky Faith Innovation: How Your Compassion, Creativity, and Courage Can Support Teenagers' Lasting Faith*, in conjunction with another Lilly Endowment Inc. grant-funded project (i.e., Youth Ministry Innovations; 2015 1077).

[3] Young Adult Ministry Now

[4] Roose, Greeenway, Argue article

transition in which they negotiate and renegotiate who they are, where they belong, and what difference they can make in the world. Emerging adults' quests to clarify and embrace their identity, belonging, and purpose can evoke external and internal instability where they experience and attempt to negotiate numerous transitions.[5]

Our focus on emerging adult transitions, defined more specifically below, attempts to reframe ministry leaders' current narratives about who emerging adults are, what demands most of their attention, and how they access resources to negotiate these spaces. Our previous work surfaced perceptions of ministry leaders who, while genuinely desiring to support emerging adults, had predominantly negative impressions of them as they struggled to understand the lives, quests, and needs of emerging adults in their communities. Hence, their young adult ministry approaches tended to be misguided, even hurtful. For many Christian emerging adults, congregational connections remain on the periphery of their lives as connecting with congregations becomes vague after high school graduation. The result ends in a relational stalemate where congregations and emerging adults appreciate one another but struggle to find a shared connection. Symptoms of this surface with churches frustrated that emerging adults do not show up to worship and serve their programs and emerging adults suspicious of churches who do not understand them or their friends.

FYI's MIYA work taught us that the disconnect between young adults and congregations is rarely technical (full schedules, busyness, laziness, lack of interest, etc.) but relational and adaptive in that young adults perceive it harder to find connection and support from churches.[6]

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[5] Some examples may include the transition from a familiar college-aged Christian community to a new faith community, the transition into the workforce, the transition into marriage and childrearing, and the transition to developing an intersectional identity (harmonizing their gender, race, ethnicity, and orientation).

[6] Melinda Lundquist Denton and Richard Flory, *Back-Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Our DIYA research sought to discover and describe more reliable areas of connection, leading us to the concept of transitions. Our literature review informed our definition of transitions *as the new, challenging, exciting, and disorienting experiences emerging adults encounter as they navigate life changes and make choices to take responsibility for their lives and relationships. For emerging adults, transitions bring experiences of gain and loss as they work to develop and harmonize their lives.* Our research question for our DIYA project was: How do young adults, ages 23-29, identify and work through transitions in their third decade of life?

1. What transitions do they say they experienced the most/least (Transition experience – gain/loss)?
2. What transitions do they report working on the most/least? (Transition agency– development/harmonization)?
3. Given a memorable transition they identify:
    a. What brought the transition on?
    b. Who did they look to for support?
    c. What was it like to work through this transition?
4. How have their transition experiences influenced or shaped their spiritual/religious beliefs or practices?

In this piece, we will start by showing how emerging adulthood is a period of transition, and indeed, multiple transitions. Next, we will describe how we developed emerging adult transition into a conceptual framework based on the most recent peer-reviewed literature that surfaced seven prevalent transitions emerging adults experience. We'll briefly describe an update in our work and how our conceptual framework informed our nationally representative survey of emerging adults, guiding our current young/emerging adult ministry landscape analysis. Finally,

we will explore theological concepts that offer good news in light of emerging adults' transitions and our findings.

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging Adulthood, first defined by Jeffery Arnett at the turn of the millennium, describes the experiences of those who no longer identify as adolescents or adults.[7] This period between adolescence and adulthood has extended for most people in their twenties as it takes longer to achieve adulthood. "Adulthood," described by older generations as settling down, finding your career, getting married, or having children, is not seen by emerging adults in the same way. In fact, emerging adults say that they reach adulthood when they can take responsibility for themselves, make independent decisions, and become financially independent. Traditional markers often used to signal adulthood, like a job, marriage, or even children, are not necessarily adult-status indicators for emerging adults. The five key features described by Arnett and nuanced by many emerging adult scholars include identity exploration, experiencing instability, being self-focused, feeling in-between, and facing simultaneously exciting and daunting possibilities. Note that most of these descriptors reference movement, motion, or change. In his book Journeys Though Emerging Adult, Reifman begins by quoting Walters et al. (2011), "It is clear that young adults face less scripted and more individualistic transition from teenager to adult."[8] Hence, while emerging adulthood is recognized as a transition period, it is more likely to be a period of many transitions that are often unique to emerging adult individuals. Adult milestones that most individuals historically accessed as signs of adulting take

[7] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929382.001.0001.
[8] Alan Reifman, *Journeys through Emerging Adulthood: An Introduction to Development from Ages 18-30 around the World* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023).

longer to achieve and are often no longer seen as markers of adulthood. For those interested in young people growing up in today's world, whether educators, parents, employers, or faith communities, the transitions emerging adults experience are no longer uniform or predictable, making understanding and engagement more challenging. It is notable that perhaps, the tension among parents of emerging adult children, churches wondering where all the young adults have gone (especially after all we are invested in youth ministry programming), and employers struggling to manage new employees are symptoms (at least in part) of emerging adult transitions.

Transition in Emerging Adulthood: A reality, not a condition

Research in emerging adulthood emphasizes that the transitions emerging adults experience are not merely based on their choices but also rooted in the world they have inherited from previous generations. This can be misunderstood by many who evoke "generational wars," disparaging younger generations ("Millennials these days!") and clapping back to older generations ("Okay Boomer"). Latent in these assumptions is that, somehow, every person is a free agent to make their choices, and they reap the consequences of these choices. While the agency of emerging adults is desired and activated, many of their choices are influenced by forces beyond their control. Economic independence or educational attainment requires more investment and time before emerging adults qualify for their desired jobs and have the income to establish financial independence. Education itself is more expensive. Hence, degree completion takes longer, whereas 4-year college is rarely the norm today. Further, institutional loyalty in a global economy has declined, where most emerging adults must act as free agents in need of reinventing themselves in a technological world that renders their training obsolete after a few years. For emerging adults to keep up and achieve their goals, they are often required to change

jobs (e.g., those in their twenties will have 8.2 jobs) and live in different cities.[9] A more empathetic outlook is to see emerging adults' in-motion lives as that of necessity more than choice. Beyond emerging adults' diverse and elongated journeys, the third decade of life proves to be one of the most consequential, as emerging adults often make decisions that can enhance or derail their future lives.[10] Emerging adults feel more weight regarding their choices, vocations, and relationships. Thus, psychologist Meg Jay cautions that while it takes longer for people to achieve adulthood, emerging adults must view the third decade of life as a decade of investment in their future selves.[11]

A misnomer with emerging adult transitions is that their experiences are "abnormal," like a condition to be fixed or cured. Such an approach views transitions as exceptions to the rule and problematic. Such assumptions mislead how emerging adults are understood and misinform the support they need. Instead, emerging adults' transitions are normative as they seek to harmonize their identities, negotiate new and existing relationships, and refine their purpose in life.[12] Transition can be turbulent as they make meaning of their lives, evaluating what they have been taught and how they make sense of their lives.[13] Transition is also a period of cultivating agency where emerging adults explore and embody ways to synthesize their past, present, and

[9] "People Born in Early 1980s Held an Average of 8.2 Jobs from Ages 18 through 32." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 2020. https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/people-born-in-early-1980s-held-an-average-of-8-point-2-jobs-from-ages-18-through-32.htm#:~:text=The%20Economics%20Daily-,People%20born%20in%20early%201980s%20held%20an%20average%20of,from%20ages%2018%20through%2032&text=People%20born%20in%201980–84,than%20women%20with%20lower%20levels.

[10] Meg Jay, *The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter and How to Make the Most of Them Now*, First updated trade paperback edition. (New York: Twelve, 2021).

[11] Jay.

[12] Steven C. Argue and Tyler S. Greenway, "Empathy with Emerging Generations as a Foundation for Ministry," *Christian Education Journal* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2020): 110–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891319899666.

[13] Hak Joon Lee, ed., *Intersecting Realities: Race, Identity, and Culture in the Spiritual-Moral Life of Young Asian Americans* (Eugene, UNITED STATES: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018).

future.[14] Also, amid the hard work of transitions, emerging adults often maintain a hopeful growth mindset that fosters resilience and malleability.[15]

A crucial approach to our project's research relies on the literature's perspective that transitions are the lived spaces where emerging adults dedicate tremendous focus and energy. Their investment in specific transitions leaves them less time or desire to be involved in milestones or activities that seem more reserved for those who have worked through transitions. Further, while we can assume that all human beings experience transitions throughout life, emerging adulthood is a unique period where individuals are, for the first time, taking responsibility for their lives and feeling the weight of how their decisions can impact the trajectory of their lives.[16] It is likely that this is where emerging adults seek help, advice, resources, wisdom, mentorship, or support in the transitional spaces where their past experiences cannot carry them forward without the help of others. Here, in these transitional, liminal spaces, we speculate young adults are seeking the support and connection of others.

Emerging Adulthood and Transition(s)

The descriptions of emerging adults' journeys found in the literature, and our MIYA study brought our team to ask what is particularly happening in this diverse and elongated period of emerging adulthood. We considered how we might offer a thicker description of what characterizes transition in emerging, considering this period of transition as populated with various specific transitions related—but not limited—to changes in identity, relationships,

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[14] Kate C. McLean and Andrea Breen, *Selves in a World of Stories During Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795574.013.29.
[15] Tammy J. Halstead, "Requisite Metamorphoses: College Graduates Transitioning from School to Work," in *Young Adult Development at the School-to-Work Transition*, by Tammy J. Halstead (Oxford University Press, 2021), 443–60, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190941512.003.0020.
[16] Reifman, *Journeys through Emerging Adulthood : An Introduction to Development from Ages 18-30 around the World*.

vocation, health, responsibility, geographical location, and institutional affiliation, and spirituality or religion.[17] Therefore, we define "transitions" as new, challenging, exciting, and disorienting experiences emerging adults encounter as they navigate changes and make choices to take responsibility for their lives and relationships.

For emerging adults, transitions bring experiences of gain and loss as they work to develop and harmonize their lives. This change may involve disorientation, reorientation, negotiation, differentiation, re-definition, deconstruction, and reconstruction, marking various turning points on the path of growth.[18] Transitions can also be experienced both internally and externally. For example, an emerging adult may be wrestling with an internal identity by trying to uncover values and morals and/or how to voice doubts. Externally, the emerging adult might be on a quest to explore career goals, asking questions like: "What role do I play in society?" and "How do I define myself, and how do my friends and/or community define me?" Hence, negotiating transitions during emerging adulthood can be simultaneously exciting, overwhelming, disorienting, and often a very lonely process as they try to orient the deeply felt convictions they are working towards clarifying for themselves and others.

Literature Review on Emerging Adults and Transitions

To establish a conceptual framework, we endeavored to understand better the most prevalent transitions emerging adults (ages 18-29) encounter as they negotiate an often less-defined path from adolescence to adulthood. To capture the most relevant, recent, and inclusive literature on emerging adulthood about our research question, our literature review focused on

[17] Christopher P. Barlett, Natalie D. Barlett, and Holly McCartney Chalk, "Transitioning Through Emerging Adulthood and Physical Health Implications," *Emerging Adulthood* 8, no. 4 (August 2020): 297–305, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696818814642.

[18] Georgia T. Chao and Philip D. Gardner, "Healthy Transitions to Work," in *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood: Positive Development During the Third Decade in Life*, ed. Laura Padilla-Walker and Larry J. Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 104–28; Halstead, "Requisite Metamorphoses."

research articles and books containing samples from North America (primarily within the United States); studies with emerging adult research samples that focus primarily on the 18-29 age range; and articles published from 2014 to the present (i.e., 2023).[19]

A total of 85 articles and book chapters, primarily from the field of psychology, were reviewed. Of these, 33 contained original research that quantified the racial and ethnic representation of the emerging adults studied or focused solely on one racial or ethnic group. On average, the samples from these 33 articles consisted of 57.38% White (Hispanic and Non-Hispanic), 13.92% Hispanic/Latinx, 13.89% Black or African-American, 8.12% Asian, 4.92% two or more races, 1.30% Middle Eastern or North African, 1.53% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.47% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders, and 4.47% Others (either undefined or defined as more than one race or having missing data). The ethnic demographic representation of our literature review was aimed to closely resemble the projected racial and ethnic distribution of the US in 2060 to capture the experiences of minority groups and to counterbalance past inequities of overly centering White experiences in research.[20] Of the 33 original research articles, 9 focused primarily on one racial or ethnic group (3 on Hispanic/Latinx, 3 on African-American, 1 on multiracial, 1 on Arab-American, 1 on Jewish). 30% of the articles were based on the non-college emerging adult population, and 25% of the articles were on specific population groups, including those formerly in the foster care system, homeless, queer, disabled, immigrant/migrant, incarcerated, military, and those with deaf or gay parents. Our literature review was mindful of the diverse young adult experiences that result from ethnic/racial diversity, socioeconomic status, and various lived experiences of young adults in America.

[19] Ana Dolores et al., "Transitions Impacting Identity, Belonging, and Purpose in Emerging Adults" (Fuller Youth Institute, January 2023).
[20] Jonathan Vespa, Lauren Medina, and David M Armstrong, "Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060," Current Population Reports (U.S. Census Bureau, March 2018).

Nationwide Survey and Interviews

Our literature review surfaced seven predominant transitions that established our conceptual framework. Next, we sought to test our framework by conducting a nationwide, nationally representative survey of 1044 emerging adults aged 23-29 who identified as Christian and reported experiencing a significant transition in their twenties. As with the literature review, we set goals for ethnic demographic representation in line with the 2060 US Census projections.[21] Data were collected in Spring 2023, and while we are still processing responses, our initial review reveals that the seven transitions from our conceptual framework ring true with our survey's emerging adult participants. In Fall 2023, our research involves interviewing participants from our survey pool of 1044 to gain a thicker description of their transition experiences, views on faith/spirituality, and their impressions of faith communities.

Emerging Adults and Seven Prevalent Transitions

The literature review and nationwide survey helped us identify and confirm seven key transitions emerging adults likely experience. Not every emerging adult experiences every transition, and particular transitions may influence others. In addition, elements such as one's racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or religious background will likely shape which and how significant one experiences these transitions. The seven prevalent transitions reveal identity, vocation, wellness, spiritual/religious, responsibility, geographical/institutional, and relationships. Brief descriptions will be provided for each.

Identity Transitions

[21] Vespa, Medina, and Armstrong.

Identity transitions are emerging adults' efforts to harmonize their multiple internal and external identities to live out and embrace their authentic selves. As they exit adolescence, emerging adults utilize their cognitive capabilities to reflect upon, act upon, and curate their identities. For example, they may assess their upbringing, ascribe to or reject gender norms, reconsider their inherited religious traditions, or voice their doubts and convictions.

One form of identity transition is articulated through Schachter's identity configuration model, where individuals seek coherence with their various identities.[22] This model shows how emerging adults might favor, contradict, suppress, or harmonize their identities as they strive to make sense of who they are and how they choose to identify themselves. This process requires extra self-reflection and social support.[23]

Relational Transitions

In relational transitions, emerging adults take ownership of their relationships by strengthening and/or renegotiating their current relationships with family and friends, which may lead to deeper intimacy, modification, or dissolution of relationships.[24] In addition to existing relationships, emerging adults also seek new relationships, focusing on individuals who share the same values, beliefs, and worldviews, which could evolve into friendships, community, or a long-term.[25] Relationships, according to the functional-specific models (wherein relationships

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[22] Elli P. Schachter, "Identity Configurations: A New Perspective on Identity Formation in Contemporary Society," *Journal of Personality* 72, no. 1 (February 2004): 167–200, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00260.x.

[23] McLean and Breen, *Selves in a World of Stories During Emerging Adulthood*.

[24] Tara M. Stoppa, Graciela Espinosa-Hernandez, and Meghan M. Gillen, "The Roles of Religiousness and Spirituality in the Sexual Lives of Heterosexual Emerging Adults," in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality: Meaning-Making in an Age of Transition*, ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, First edition, Emerging Adulthood Series (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2014), 186–203.

[25] Erin Kramer Holmes et al., "Healthy Transitions to Family Formation," in *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood: Positive Development During the Third Decade of Life*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190260637.003.0006; William B. Whitney and Pamela Ebstyne King, "Religious Congregations and Communities," in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality*, ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (Oxford University Press, 2014), 133–51, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199959181.003.0008.

serve very distinct functions and are not only a matter of preference), satisfy needs for security, intimacy, and self-esteem.[26] Emerging adults can experience both positive and negative effects from their relationships as they build and prune relationships in their lives to seek security and intimacy.

Vocational Transitions

Vocational transitions are defined as emerging adults' efforts to make meaningful contributions to the world and provide for themselves and others. A vocational transition can be divided into two concepts: vocation as purpose and vocation as work. Vocation as purpose is a heavily philosophical experience in which an emerging adult attempts to answer the question "What difference do I make?" by contemplating topics such as calling, meaningfulness, and morality. Although emerging adults are sometimes categorized as a "lost generation" or "narcissistic" by the media or older generations, most pursue purposeful and meaningful work. Exploration of their purpose can guide emerging adults in decision-making, commitment, and meaningful actions for themselves and others.[27] Vocation as work emphasizes career and practical use of one's abilities. Within this practical aspect of vocational transition, school-to-work-transitions (STWT) are the most prominent transitions in the emerging adulthood literature reviewed. Some researchers have commented that what is considered a "successful" STWT

[26] Laura M. Padilla-Walker, Madison K. Memmott-Elison, and Larry J. Nelson, "Positive Relationships as an Indicator of Flourishing During Emerging Adulthood," in *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood: Positive Development During the Third Decade of Life*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190260637.003.0018.

[27] Jos Akkermans et al., "Ready, Set, Go!: School-to-Work Transition in the New Career," in *Young Adult Development at the School-to-Work Transition*, by Jos Akkermans et al. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 77–104, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190941512.003.0004; Chao and Gardner, "Healthy Transitions to Work"; Vanessa L. Madrazo and Jenni Menon Mariano, "Purpose and Career Goals: A Qualitative Study," in *Young Adult Development at the School-to-Work Transition*, by Vanessa L. Madrazo and Jenni Menon Mariano (Oxford University Press, 2021), 49–76, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190941512.003.0003.

implies that there is "only one right way" of making this transition.[28] Hence, they propose an adaptive STWT instead, in which the focus is on the process rather than the outcome. Considering this transition as a process gives the emerging adult autonomy and freedom to transition in many ways. An adaptive STWT also gives the individual room to thrive and achieve a person-career fit that lays the foundation for a sustainable career in the labor market.[29] Philosophical and practical ways emerging adults may contribute to society through their purpose and work are important to consider in understanding the significance of their vocational transitions.

Wellness Transitions

Emerging adults are considered to be in the prime of their health, yet they also face wellness transitions that can often determine the trajectory of their health into adulthood.[30] There are three components of health—physical, mental, and social—and each component is experienced in varying degrees for individuals. For some emerging adults, wellness transitions move toward recovery (e.g., alcohol addiction to sobriety), while for others, the direction is the opposite (e.g., good health to medical diagnosis). Often, wellness transitions involve investing time and resources (e.g., taking time off work to go to appointments and paying medical bills), which can be challenging and stressful as emerging adults navigate other transitional experiences in their lives simultaneously. And as wellness transitions often involve changes in habits and

[28] Akkermans et al., "Ready, Set, Go!"; Myriam Forster et al., "Household Incarceration and Salient Emerging Adult Role Transitions: Findings From an Urban Sample of Hispanic Youth," *Emerging Adulthood* 7, no. 1 (February 2019): 3–11, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696817751749.
[29] Akkermans et al., "Ready, Set, Go!"; Chao and Gardner, "Healthy Transitions to Work"; Forster et al., "Household Incarceration and Salient Emerging Adult Role Transitions."
[30] Jennifer L. Tanner, *Mental Health in Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795574.013.30.

patterns (e.g., binge eating to eating routinely, attending social gatherings to staying at home, etc.), they can impact the well-being of emerging adults daily.

Responsibility Transitions

Tanner noted that emerging adulthood is a juncture in the life span of human development that marks a drastic transition in responsibility.[31] This includes turning 18 when one has new legal responsibilities. Other transitions may be deliberately selected as one chooses to prepare for a particular career, invest in a relationship, become a parent, or set other life goals. Less social oversight is placed upon emerging adults who must now draw from internal motivation and conviction to achieve their goals. Here, agency and advocacy for their own lives must emerge. Some emerging adults who have not learned to take responsibility for themselves during adolescence can struggle as emerging adults.[32] Also, responsibility thrust upon emerging adults due, perhaps, to a dramatic event or life change (parenthood, family crisis, etc.) can feel overwhelmed with their new responsibilities.[33]

Geographical or Institutional Transitions

Geographical and institutional transitions describe the physical moves, adjustments, and changes emerging adults experience when relocating to different places as well as moving between institutions.[34] This transition may involve moving to a new state, region, country, organization, church, or place, as well as switching from school to work or from one workplace to another.[35] For emerging adults who are part of a minority community, these transitions can

[31] Tanner.
[32] Forster et al., "Household Incarceration and Salient Emerging Adult Role Transitions."
[33] Larry J. Nelson, "The Role of Parents in the Religious and Spiritual Development of Emerging Adults," in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality*, ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (Oxford University Press, 2014), 59–75, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199959181.003.0004.
[34] Halstead, "Requisite Metamorphoses."
[35] Akkermans et al., "Ready, Set, Go!"

also occur between dual cultural contexts and can be strongly felt even with seemingly small transitions. Navigating the dominant white culture and the minority culture on a daily basis (resulting in code-switching) is often challenging and taxing, especially if they have not developed a balanced sense of racial identity.[36] The changes brought about through geographical-institutional transitions seem to significantly impact identity and sense of belonging, especially for minority emerging adults who must navigate the expression of their various cultural identities in the context of the new geographical-institutional culture.

Religious/Spiritual Transitions

Most of the literature reviewed focuses on young adults raised in or currently practicing their religion. Therefore, the religious and spiritual transitions addressed in this paper are limited to religious orientation and participation rather than conversion.

Many emerging adults take up the self-authoring task of (re)writing their identities, worldviews, and communities during emerging adulthood.[37] This task often leads them through religious and spiritual transitions, which can be defined as emerging adults' efforts to evaluate the religious and spiritual narratives they have inherited from parents/guardians, mentors, and/or faith communities while constructing a worldview that is congruent with their emerging identity, belonging, and purpose. Emerging adults may experience religious and spiritual struggles as they strive to find coherence between their internal reflections and external observations around

[36] Dalal Katsiaficas, "'I Know I'm an Adult When…I Can Care for Myself and Others': The Role of Social Responsibilities in Emerging Adulthood for Community College Students," *Emerging Adulthood* 5, no. 6 (December 2017): 392–405, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696817698301; Lee, *Intersecting Realities*.
[37] Gina Magyar-Russell, Paul L. Deal, and Iain Tucker Brown, "Potential Benefits and Detriments of Religiousness and Spirituality to Emerging Adults," in *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality: Meaning-Making in an Age of Transition*, ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, First edition, Emerging Adulthood Series (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2014), 39–55.

them.[38] In response, emerging adults go through religious and spiritual transitions that, for some, increase their commitment to religion and, for others, detach and distance them.[39]

As emerging adults develop their agency and independence, their level and source of motivation in various aspects of life (including religious orientation) may shift during emerging adulthood. Therefore, as emerging adults explore the values and norms of their upbringing, some religious and spiritual transitions during this time may involve shifts in extrinsic to intrinsic religious orientation. One's religious/spiritual transition may involve the process of adopting, nuancing, and rejecting some or all of their family or faith community's religious/spiritual beliefs and practices. This negotiation may also be coupled with emerging adult experiences of a broader and more diverse world that challenges their religious/spiritual assumptions.[40]

Some emerging adults may find their religious and spiritual identity in conflict. For example, emerging adults who are LGBTQ+ are less likely to express religious identity because they perceive their religious identity as something that cannot be reconciled with their sexual and ethnic identity.[41] As a result, religious identity may transition out as a part of the selfhood for many members of this population. In contrast, others struggle with their ethnic and gender identity while upholding their religious identity. For example, Asian American female leaders in

[38] Magyar-Russell, Deal, and Tucker Brown.

[39] Carly J. Claney et al., "Sexual without Sex: A Qualitative Study of Single Emerging Adult Evangelical Women.," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (May 2020): 191–200, https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000191; Fanli Jia et al., "Development of Religious Identity and Commitment During Emerging Adulthood: A Mixed-Methods Longitudinal Study," *Emerging Adulthood* 9, no. 3 (June 1, 2021): 259–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696820949799.

[40] Steven C. Argue, "Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle and the Quest to Remain Faithful," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 8–29.

[41] Lee, *Intersecting Realities*; Joshua G. Parmenter et al., "Intersectionality and Identity Configurations: A Qualitative Study Exploring Sexual Identity Development Among Emerging Adults Within the United States," *Emerging Adulthood* 10, no. 2 (April 2022): 372–85, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696820946597.

the church often encounter both gendered and racial challenges in church settings, as the history of Christianity has been predominantly White-male-centric.[42]

Transitions Summary

We tested conceptual framework of seven transitions through our nationally representative survey of 1044 Christian emerging adults. Their responses confirmed that the transitions we identified were significant. This has given us added confidence for us to be more particular about how we help emerging adults understand their transition experiences and how we train concerned adults and organizations to support emerging adults in these spaces where they seek the most help.

Preliminary Survey Findings

While data is still being analyzed from our nationwide survey, our preliminary survey work have noted a few significant findings. Here, we share some of our most prevailing discoveries.

Emerging Adults' transition experiences and energy/effort toward working through them

Our definition of emerging adult transition carefully notes that emerging adults can experience particular transitions yet may choose to work through the same or different transition. This is significant because we learn that while emerging adults may experience one transition more dramatically than another, they may choose to invest their energy or effort toward working through a different transition. Participants from the survey said their level of experience associated with the seven transitions fell in this order (most to least experienced, comparatively): responsibility, spiritual/religious, vocational, relational, wellness, identity, and

[42] Daniel D. Lee et al., "Asian American Emerging Adults and Theological Education: Findings and Recommendations" (Fuller Theological Seminary: Center for Asian American Theology and Ministry, 2020).

geographical/institutional. Yet, the amount of effort participants noted resulted in a different order: responsibility, wellness, relational and spiritual/religious (tie), geographical/institutional, vocational, and identity. More work needs to be done to understand these findings and how emerging adults can best be supported. Hence, transitions most experienced by emerging adults may not be the ones emerging adults choose to work though. Those who seek to support emerging adults must pay attention to both as experiences might reveal an immediate or episodic need where the effort emerging adults place on another transition might be what they are seeking the most support in.

Emerging Adults' Religious/Spiritual Snapshots

Emerging adults indicated that they care about their religion/spirituality. When we asked them how important religion/spirituality is in their lives, 90% religion as at least moderately important, with over half viewing it as very or extremely important to their lives. Second, emerging adults describe their participation with faith communities beyond "attendance." While many noted that they are regular attenders at their church or parish, others described their connection through young adult ministry offerings, attending small groups, or serving. About 30% said they did not participate. These findings are not necessarily surprising as many indicate participating while a significant majority do not.[43] What is most encouraging is our quest to broaden the metrics beyond Sunday attendance to find more congruent ways to understand emerging adults' participation that acknowledge their transitions.

Aware Churches Matter to Emerging Adults

[43] Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came from, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*, 1 online resource (xi, 145 pages) : illustrations, charts vols. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2021), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2752273.

Our survey attempted to capture the emotions emerging adults felt as they described their transition experiences. In addition, we were curious how emerging adults would respond if we asked them if their church, parish, or congregation was aware of the transition they named. Initial data show that of those emerging adults who said their faith community was aware of their transition, 90% felt supported by them. Further, those who felt supported by aware congregations reported higher scores on desirable feelings and lower scores on less desirable feelings than those who said their congregations were unaware.[44] Our survey was not robust enough to unpack what "awareness" means or looks like to emerging adults, and we anticipate more examples and stories through our follow-up interviews. Still, our initial findings indicate that emerging adults who say their communities are aware of their transitions feel supported.

Theological Considerations for Transitions

As we have conceptualized emerging adults and transitions, we are encouraged by how useful and familiar "transitions" appear to be to emerging adults and ministry leaders. We have started testing our categories with both groups to see what makes sense to them, and we are encouraged by the feedback and energy surrounding emerging adult transitions. The concept of transitions also brings some difficulty and confusion. First, given the rising awareness and public discourse about trans rights, usually more familiar with younger people, some have initially been confused when we ask them about their transition or transitions. In our interviews, we have qualified the term by asking them about their life-transitions, which brings clarity. More significantly, the term "transition," which captures the in-motion state of emerging adults, has a

[44] Note: We acknowledge that all feelings are legitimate and essential in the human experience. Our description is not a value statement as much as it is practically attempting to note that most people desire to be happy rather than sad, at peace rather than anxious, etc.

shadow side in that it may implicitly signal that emerging adults are “less than,” “insignificant,” or incomplete.

Further, transition concepts may assume that the goal is to get through transitions rather than to live well in them. Here may be where some of the painful discourse by adults impacts emerging adults. Suppose adults only ask emerging adults about the completion of the transition, for example, what they’re doing with their life, when they’re going to get married, or when they’re going to settle down to get a real job, get back to church, or start believing in God again. In that case, this language speaks “stability language” and fails to acknowledge the present reality of an emerging adult’s transitional state. Our initial findings indicate that some of the most prevalent emotions emerging adults report feeling about their transitions are anxiousness, sadness, fear, and loneliness. Discourse with emerging adults that only speaks about where they “ought” to be rather than acknowledging their current transitional state can alienate and discourage them.

Our study focuses on emerging adults who identify as Christian. Therefore, our findings seek to understand and inform how faith communities might think of how the gospel communicates good news to emerging adults as they negotiate their transitions. Perhaps theologically, some other terms and images might better capture what emerging adults are experiencing and even contribute to faith communities. One potential approach is to consider emerging adults as those in “migration” or on “pilgrimage.” These terms surface significant images rooted in the scriptures' storyline. First, we witness the people of God in the Exodus faithfully leaving Egypt to follow God to the promised land. This act requires God’s people to trust God for their survival and not be tempted to forget God or turn to god-like alternatives. Jesus’ prayer for daily bread is literally provided through manna, and faithfulness is a daily

exercise (Matthew 6). And end unto itself rather than merely a means to "get to the final destination.' The 40 years of wandering in the wilderness reminds us that God's people were not ready for the promised land and had things to learn along the way. Smith speaks to the importance of not only "where" are we in life but "when" are we. He reflects, "When we recognize that we are always embedded in a *when*, a pressing question dawns from this recognition: *When are we?* And where is God in this *when*? Where is the Spirit afoot in our now?"[45] Such questions seem especially relevant for emerging adults who often feel behind and faith communities who expect them to grow up faster. What might it mean to for emerging adults to embrace that they are right on time and are invited to discover God right were they are?

Second, it is interesting to note that God's in-motion, people seemed more aware of God's presence and provision than when they tried to erect statues and temples. One could argue that the migration or pilgrimage of God's people made them more attuned to God than when they settled and were self-sufficient. Even Jesus speaks of the transition-ness of his disciples and the flexibility one must have to follow Jesus. Perhaps these images challenge current ministry assumptions where emerging adults and their transitions are looked down upon, are viewed as people to be fixed, or are problems to the church. Might their transition-pilgrimage-migration express more clearly, the character of God who "tabernacles" with God's in-motion people throughout history and most explicitly embodies this through Jesus' incarnation (John 1). As theologian, Kutter Callaway suggests, " [t]his kind of Divine residence is dynamic and highly adaptable, oriented towards God's presence with God's people amid their concrete, on-the-

[45] James K. A. 1970- Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022). P. 48.

ground experiences, which almost always involve movement, disruption, and dispersion."[46] Further, might transition speak to the gift emerging adults' lives bring to faith communities, where the ones in the liminal spaces are most attuned to God? What if emerging adults' transition experiences have something to teach our faith communities? What if they are not the problems but the prophets who actually see things more clearly? We have begun to test these ideas with emerging adults and are discovering that they resonate with Christian theology of God who moves with them; that their in-motion lives may be the liminal, holy spaces where they are more attuned to the Spirit; and that their transition experiences are not sources of shame but significant spaces from which they can bear witness and bless others. The thought that they might be on time, in tune, and can live well amid transition rings as good news to them.

Conclusion

We have endeavored to use emerging adult transitions as a conceptual framework for understanding and supporting young adults where they seek the most help. Our framework, rooted in the latest peer-reviewed research on emerging adults and transitions, informed our nationally representative survey that, at first blush, confirms seven key transitions that emerging adults are most likely to experience. Knowledge of these transitions offers focus and language to help emerging adults make sense of their transitional experiences. It also provides clarity for those who wish to use their resources to support emerging adults. Emerging adults experience and work through transitions, making these more than inconvenient interruptions but central experiences that have spiritual meaning about their identity, belonging, and purpose. Their experiences have theological meaning and may bring good news to their Christian lives as they

[46] Kutter Callaway, "Restoring hope: Being weak and becoming well," *Fuller Magazine, Issue 006, 2016 - Restore* (Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016), WorldCat.org, http://cdm16677.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16677coll11/id/3519.

discover that God travels with them in their in-motion lives and that their lives may have a unique view of God's faithfulness that can bless faith communities. We hope this approach might reframe adults' assumptions about emerging adults and their journeys to adulthood, which evokes hope and new possibilities for intergenerational faith communities to engage and support each other.

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