Emerging Adult Engagement in Religious Communities: Practices that Work

J. Matt Mitchell
(Senior Pastor, Greenwood Hills Wesleyan Church, High Point, NC; Current Ph.D. student, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)
zmitch3@tiu.edu

Elizabeth A. Bjorling
(Preteen and Junior High Pastor, College Church of the Nazarene, Bourbonnais, IL, Current Ph.D. student, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)
zebjorli@tiu.edu

Benjamin D. Espinoza
(Director of Youth and Community Life, Covenant Church, Bowling Green, Ohio),
ben@bgcovenant.org

Abstract: While emerging adults’ perceptions of religious institutions are numerous, it is apparent emerging adults are skeptical of and generally feel ignored by religious institutions. In light of this reality, the proposed article will explore how Christian practices can be used to engage with emerging adults, while allowing space for emerging adults to become co-creators of experiences and innovations for faith communities (Crouch 2008; Sherman 2011). We propose that Christian practices, such as hospitality, sharing stories, and giving generously, will help meet the needs of emerging adults: navigating identity explorations, seeking stability, moving beyond egocentrism to exocentrism, establishing a footing from adolescence to adulthood, and help to provide guidance in the midst of endless possibilities (Arnett 2004, 8).

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Introduction

Arnett’s (2000) theory of emerging adulthood has revolutionized the way in which scholars and practitioners understand individuals ages 18-29. Arnett’s theory developed as a result of changes taking place in American culture. He noticed individuals in their late teens and twenties were pursuing more education and delaying marriage compared to earlier generations. Arnett argues, “These changes over the past half century have altered the nature of development in the late teens and early twenties for young people in industrialized societies” (2000, 469). Therefore, the theory of emerging adulthood argues for a new developmental stage between adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett 2000). Arnett describes the period of emerging adulthood as such:
1. It is the age of identity exploration, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work.
2. It is the age of instability.
3. It is the most self-focused age of life.
4. It is the age of feeling in-between, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult.
5. It is the age of possibilities, when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives” (Arnett 2004, 8).

Despite the theory’s strong theoretical framework (Erikson 1950; Levinson 1978; Keniston 1971), some scholars believe “it is useless to describe human transitions as ‘stages’ because in our ‘movement’ through the life course we are advancing, regressing, developing in some domains and not in others; in a sense ever-becoming but never arriving” (Kloep and Hendry 2011, 54)!

Despite this disagreement, the terminology and theory of emerging adulthood has been accepted by many scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the religious faith of emerging adults (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Arnett and Tanner 2006; Barry and Nelson 2008; Barry et al. 2010; Bergler 2012; Black 2006; Black 2008; Dunn and Sundene 2012; Koenig, McGue, and Iacono 2008; Setran and Kiesling 2013; Smith and Snell 2009; Smith et al. 2011; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). The overall perception of religious institutions among emerging adults has been a topic of interest among scholars and practitioners (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Setran and Kiesling 2013; Wuthnow 2007). While emerging adults’ perceptions of religious institutions are numerous, it is apparent emerging adults are skeptical of and generally feel ignored by religious institutions.

In light of this reality, this paper will explore how Christian practices can re-engage emerging adults, while allowing space for emerging adults to become co-creators of experiences and innovations for faith communities (Crouch 2008; Sherman, 2011). We propose that Christian practices, such as hospitality, sharing stories, and giving generously, will help meet the needs of emerging adults: navigating identity explorations, seeking stability, moving beyond egocentrism to exocentrism, establishing a footing from adolescence to adulthood, and help to provide guidance in the midst of endless possibilities (Arnett 2004, 8). The paper will first provide a brief review of relevant literature on emerging adults’ perceptions and relationship with religious institutions in North America. The paper will then explore the theoretical underpinnings of Christian practices, which the authors believe can reinvigorate the church’s ministry to emerging adults. Finally, the paper will explore numerous practical ways in which ministers and church leaders can re-engage emerging adults through Christian practices that align with Arnett’s (2000) five needs of emerging adults.

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1 The listed sources are only a small portion of scholars who use the term “emerging adulthood” in their research. The large amount of scholars supporting Arnett’s (2000) theory is too large to cite.
Emerging Adults’ Perceptions of Religious Institutions in North America

Research reveals the overall perception of religious institutions among emerging adults is negative (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Belzer et al. 2006; Colón and Field 2009; Kinnaman and Lyons 2007; Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011; Setran and Kiesling 2013; Smith and Snell 2009; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007; Wuthnow 2007). While emerging adults’ perceptions of religious institutions can be numerous, it is helpful to organize them into three major categories: 1) emerging adults feel ignored by religious institutions, 2) emerging adults are skeptical of religious institutions, and 3) emerging adults believe religious institutions are too critical of their lifestyles. These three categories deserve further explanation.

Ignored by Religious Institutions

The research of Belzer et. al. (2006) revealed that many emerging adults are looking for a congregation where they belong. However, “despite their active participation, many young adults interviewed said that they do not feel integral to congregational life” (Belzer et al. 2006, 105). Consistent with Belzer et. al. (2006), Smith and Snell’s (2009) research suggests that emerging adults are involved in various groups, however, religious institutions are not places where emerging adults express a “sense of belonging” (2009, 152). In sum, emerging adults don’t feel as if they fit into a religious institution (Belzer et al. 2006; Setran and Kiesling 2013; Smith and Snell 2009; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007).

One possible reason emerging adults do not feel a “sense of belonging” is because they feel ignored by religious institutions. According to Setran and Kiesling, some pastors neglect ministry to emerging adults because they know they are in a time of transition (2013, 93). Emerging adults also feel ignored because religious institutions often do not have a ministry that focuses upon 18-29 year olds (Setran and Kiesling 2013). Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) believe emerging adults may feel “turned off” because religious institutions focus on children, youth, and families and exclude their age group. Colón and Field (2009), also argues that the ministry of the church often focuses upon families yet ignores those who are single or have chosen a life of celibacy.

Emerging adults not only feel ignored by religious institutions because of a lack of ministry for their age group, but also feel religious institutions do not take them seriously. “While schools and jobs are providing them with unprecedented levels of responsibility in a variety of leadership roles, churches still seem to treat them as ‘children,’ wholly dependent on the wisdom and experience of elder members” (Setran and Kiesling 2013, 93). The hierarchical structure and mindset of many church leaders only pushes emerging adults farther away from religious institutions (Belzer et al. 2006, 105). The hierarchical structure may influence emerging adults’ perceptions that religious institutions are too authoritarian. Erlacher’s (2012) research revealed that Millennials in ministry believe the church should operate as a family, where there is an environment of authenticity and relational leadership.
The literature suggests that emerging adults want to belong in the church. They are tired of being ignored and are looking for a place where they can belong. They desire to be a part of a community where they can grow in faith, and where they can contribute to the service of the congregation. The perception that religious institutions are ignoring emerging adults results in individuals disconnecting from religious institutions (Waters and Bortree 2012). However, when emerging adults are valued and taken seriously their faith can flourish. Dunn and Sundene write, “the key factor that determines whether young adults are thriving or simply surviving is always the same: the availability and accessibility of teachers, coaches, pastors, friends and mentors who are committed to investing in their spiritual vitality” (2012, 20). Waters and Bortree (2012) also stresses the importance of religious institutions engaging in conversations with emerging adults about issues 18-29 year-olds are concerned about. “Without engaging in these behaviors, mainline churches and denominations will continue to lose favor with young adults” (Waters and Bortree 2012, 212).

Skeptical of Religious Institutions

According to Arnett and Jensen (2002) emerging adults are skeptical of the “ready-made dogma” found in religious institutions. The research of Belzer et. al., also suggest that emerging adults “are skeptical about spirituality, religion, and institutions in general, and are acutely aware of other’s skepticism as well” (2006, 105). One of the factors contributing toward the skepticism of religious institutions may be related to emerging adulthood being an “age of identity exploration” (Arnett 2004, 8). Arnett and Jensen (2002) found that emerging adults created an individualistic set of religious beliefs by mixing Christianity with other religions as they explore different faiths. According to Arnett (2004), “Exposure to new ideas is part of the explanation for why religious beliefs often change by emerging adulthood, but probably even more important is the responsibility emerging adults feel to decide for themselves what they believe about religious questions” (2004, 177). The integration of different religions may be an attempt for emerging adults to express their personal identity. Along with a loss of individuality, Arnett and Jensen (2002) also report that negative memories of church, along with boredom, and an overwhelming sense of guilt are factors contributing toward the skepticism of religious institutions among emerging adults.

The skepticism of religious institutions may also be contributed to individuals feeling targeted by churches. Kinnaman and Lyons’ (2007) research shows that many “unchristian” individuals feel churches and Christians have a hidden agenda to convert them to Christianity. These individuals feel as if religious institutions and Christians are not interested in them as individuals. Instead, unchristian emerging adults believe churches and Christians are only interested in increasing church attendance and the number of salvations the church can report (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, 68-69).

Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) suggest that emerging adults are skeptical of authority. Emerging adults are skeptical about the authority of scripture, the
influence of Christianity upon culture, and the authority of Christian leaders (Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011, 52-56). Some emerging adults may be skeptical of religious institutions because of the way in which authority is used. For example, Robert Wuthnow points out that churches are known in society as speaking loudly on issues such as abortion and homosexuality, but are silent on issues such as cheating on taxes and accepting bribes (2007, 147-148). In sum, Arnett writes, “Their wariness of religious institutions is sometimes based on negative experiences that have led them to view such institutions as bastions of corruption and hypocrisy” (2004, 173).

The Judgmental Nature of Religious Institutions

Another common perception of many emerging adults is that religious institutions are judgmental (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007; Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011; Setran and Kiesling 2013; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). The lifestyle of emerging adults often consists of partying, alcohol use, drug use and premarital sex (Arnett 2004; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). However, while the lifestyle choices of emerging adults may be accepted among peers, many emerging adults feel religious institutions are critical of their lifestyle choices (Setran and Kiesling 2013). Kinnaman and Lyons’ (2007) interview with 16-29 year olds revealed that many individuals perceive the Christian faith as focusing too much on their shortcomings. “More than half the young Christians... said they believe that the label judgmental accurately fits present-day Christianity” (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, 183). Their research also revealed that emerging adults feel that religious institutions are critical of homosexuals and individuals who do not support the religious institutions political perspective. Kinnaman (2011) also found that emerging adults perceive religious institutions as being critical of modern science, as well as, questions rooted in doubt.

Rehabilitating Emerging Adult Involvement in Religious Institutions: Exploring Christian Practices

While emerging adults feel ignored, alienated, and inappropriately judged by religious institutions and communities, church ministers and leaders should not refrain from engaging emerging adults in the life of faith. We contend that a prime manner of re-engaging emerging adults in religious communities is through the means of Christian practices. This section will provide the theoretical underpinnings for understanding the notion of Christian practice.

MacIntyre, Wenger, And Practice

In his acclaimed work After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) writes,

By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of social established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards
of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (p. 187)

In order to understand MacIntyre’s highly sophisticated understanding of practice, we must first understand the thrust of *After Virtue*. Essentially, MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment project rejected the idea of telos, which means the “end” of a goal-oriented process. The Enlightenment emphasized the autonomy of the human agent in choosing what was good, as what is good is to be understood as “rational.” Smith and Smith (2011) argue that for MacIntyre, “there can only be talk of virtue only where there is a teleology in place, for virtues are those habits and dispositions that incline one toward the telos specified as ‘the good’” (p. 7). These habits and dispositions are not “natural” per se, but should be understood more as a “second nature,” where one acquires orientations and inclinations that are inhabited over time through participation in the rhythms and practices of a tradition or community. Practices are thus not an education in morality such as it is the shaping and forming of moral character through participation in the community. It is against this context we must understand MacIntyre’s complex and oft-cited definition of practice.

In assessing MacIntyre’s definition, Smith and Smith point out three distinct features. First, practices are social, communal, and inherited from the people associated with historical tradition. Second, only certain rituals can be called “practices” in MacIntyre’s sense, as practices deal in internal (rather than external) goods. Internal goods are those goods specific to the practice. For instance, in basketball or any game for that matter, analytic skill, improvisation, strategy, and competition are all goods inherent to game practices. Playing basketball for the purpose of personal glory, game, or financial achievement means seeking “external” goods, as telos of each of these can be achieved through separate means not specifically related to the practice. Third, practices possess certain standards of excellence which are predetermined by a tradition or community to which the practice is nourished. To enter into specific practices is to place oneself under the authority of those standards of excellence, and there is an expectation on the part of the tradition or community that these standards of excellence will govern one’s participation in the practices (Smith and Smith 2011, p. 9). MacIntyre’s definition is thus highly philosophical and complex, but is essential in understanding the foundation of the idea of practices.

Educational theorist Etienne Wenger writes that practices are actions “in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do” (1999, p. 47). This definition brings a communal approach to the idea of practice, as those who regularly engage patterns of practical rituals in everyday settings become communities of practice. Communities of practice come together regularly and perform activities with the purpose of pursuing and attaining certain goals. For Wenger, a specific “domain of interest” precipitates the community of practice. Membership in the community of practice implies a commitment to, and identification with a shared domain of interest. Hypothetically, people can be a part of the domain of interest without necessarily participating in the community of
practice. It is this domain of interest that brings a community of practice together for the purpose of sharing ideas, helping one another, and learning from one another.

### Bass, Dykstra, and the Shape of Christian Practices

While MacIntyre and Wenger give us sufficient philosophical grounding to the notion of practice, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass are two of the primary figures that have reawakened scholarly interest in Christian practices. While others have explored Christian practices in detail, the work of Dykstra and Bass has become the norm in understanding and appropriating Christian practices.

Dykstra, in his pivotal work *Growing in the Life of Faith*, argues that a practice “is an ongoing, shared activity of a community of people that partly defines and partly makes them who they are” (2005, p. 16). He writes, “The church, as community in the power of the Spirit, has over the course of its history learned to depend on the efficacy of certain central practices and disciplines in nurturing faith and growth in the life of faith” (2005, p. 41). Practices “place people in touch with God’s redemptive activity... put us where life in Christ may be made known, recognized, experienced, participated in. They are a means of grace, the human places in which and through which God’s people come to faith and grow to maturity in the life of faith” (2005, p. 43). For Dykstra, practices over time can take on more complex forms and have more global ramifications. For instance, we may practice biblical interpretation for the purpose of individual spiritual nourishment, but over time, we may begin to apply biblical interpretation to moral decision making, ethical practice, and political action (2005, p. 44).

But what of Christian practices? Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra write that practices are “the things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs, in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world” (2001, p. 18). Elsewhere, Bass defines Christian practices as “shared patterns of activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ (para. 1). “Woven together,” Bass writes, “they form a way of life” (para. 1). As Espinoza writes, “Practices should not be understood as ‘the application of our faith’ or the ‘skill of applying our faith,’ but rather as the natural outworking of a commitment to the gospel and participation in the unfolding narrative of God’s redemption in the world through Christ” (2014, p. 52). While several works elaborate on various Christian practices, some which have merited more detailed attention include giving thanks, hospitality, Sabbath, doing justice, creation care, giving generously, living in community, honoring the body, telling the Christian story, and witness.²

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Dykstra points out practices have a different set of aims and goals than Christian practices. He writes, “This is because the practice of faith is part of the distinctive story and is built on different assumptions from most other practices.” (2005, p. 75). Dykstra takes aim especially at the concept of “excellence” in practices.

The very idea of achieving excellence or of attaining the highest standards possible in the practice of practice or of forgiveness or of service seems, on the face of it, internally contradictory. Why? The reason is that excellence has to do with human achievement. But faith is not a human achievement; it is a gift. (2005, p. 75).

While we should esteem excellence and mastery over a particular practice,

The human task is not fundamentally mastery. It is rather the right use of gifts graciously bestowed by a loving God for the sake of the good that God intends--and ultimately assures... So our basic task is not mastery and control. It is instead trust and grateful receptivity. (2005, p. 75)

It is this emphasis on practicing gifts as opposed to mastering practices that causes people within our society to view Christian practices as “slightly puzzling” (2005, p. 75). “The ethical compulsion to achieve excellence is paradoxically relaxed, because the ontological/religions compulsion to mastery and control is relativized by a peaceable Grace that is at the heart and ground of everything” (2005, p. 77). Thus, Christian practices are devoid of a struggle for excellence and achievement and are instead driven toward the faithful stewardship of gifts.

Dorothy Bass gives several characteristics of Christian practices. First, Christian practices “address fundamental needs and conditions through concrete human acts” (2010, p. 6). They serve very practical purposes for the good of others. Second, they “are done together and over time” (2010, p. 7). Christian practices are those activities that the church has done for centuries, and connect us to a larger cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1), whether it is through the learning of hymns or participating in prayer meetings. Third, practices “possess standards of excellence” (2010, p. 7). In our world, we readily observe the consequences of bad practices: prejudice, racism, malicious hatred, etc. For example, Bass points out that we may need to reflect whether daily lives reflect the practice of honoring the body. “Do we recognize God’s image in all the human beings we see, or do we pay exaggerated but shallow obeisance to certain bodies while permitting others to be battered and discarded?” (2010 p. 8). Finally, practices help us perceive exactly “how our daily lives are all tangled up with the things God is doing in the world” (2010, p. 8).

Exploring Christian Practices with Emerging Adults

Thus far, we have attempted to highlight some of the key characteristics of emerging adults’ relationship with religious communities, as well as the theoretical groundwork for understanding Christian practices. In order to construct a positive
approach that engages emerging adults in Christian life and practices, we first must understand the particular psychosocial needs and characteristics of emerging adults. Arnett has labeled five common characteristics or needs of emerging adulthood, which have remained constants since he first published them in 2004. As mentioned previously, the five characteristics are “the age of identity explorations; the age of instability; the self-focused age; the age of feeling in-between; and the age of possibilities” (Arnett, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2012).

Arnett states that the exploration of identity influences all the other characteristics (2012). As emerging adults try out who they want to be and who they have been, they are trying out various identities of work, friend, and love relationships. Those that lean into their lives during this time must be aware of the changeable and malleable nature of the emerging adult’s identity. As much as a student in the hormonal swings of puberty shifts moods, the emerging adult’s perception of identity shifts depending on whom they are being influenced by. Arnett has named this the “Self Focused Age” not singularly because of the fact they are inwardly focused, but because of lack of people they answer to (2004, 2006, 2007, 2012). Compared to other seasons of life, emerging adults have the luxury of solely answering to themselves. No longer do they have to answer to parents or teachers as a child obeying. Few have spouses, children, and long standing bosses to account to (Arnett 2004, 2006, 2007, 2012).

Being sandwiched in an era of now and not yet, emerging adults find themselves feeling “in between” adolescence and adulthood. Arnett’s research in 2004 demonstrated emerging adults perceived themselves as fully arrived in adulthood when they accepted responsibility for themselves, made independent decisions, and became financially independent. Until then, they had a difficult time discerning this to be true. The final characteristic of the emerging adult is their view of this season of life as being the “age of possibilities.” “Few dreams have been tested in the fires of life. Yet when faced with the harsh realities of life, none imagine this is what life holds for them” (Arnett 2004). As they become connected to a new network of relationships and obligations they develop an independent image from their parents.

While describing these needs in a recent conversation with a sharp, creative, recent college grad whose personal belongings were stored in her borrowed minivan not even a few hundred feet from us, she said with astonishment, “These describe me.” The more conversations had with emerging adults uncovers this is the norm rather than the exception. In light of these needs the challenge becomes, how do we practically account for these characteristic needs and at the same time enrich and deepen the spiritual development of all involved? Churches across the nation are discovering how Christian practices are meeting the needs of emerging adults in fresh ways. In fact the very liturgies and historic practices that their Baby Boomer parents abandoned are being revisited with frequency (Haugen, 178).

Emerging adults are discovering in their search for identity and stability, historic practices and traditions have become an anchor they can cling to.

There are some structural walls and patterns that will need to be broken down. The challenge Christian Smith captured in an interview about his book Soul Searcher with Katelyn Beaty, “Emerging adults are structurally disconnected from
older adults who could be their mentors. The emerging adult world is self-enclosed. Older adults tend to be bosses with whom you have limited interaction, or professors with whom you are on performance terms. Even in some of the best churches, if an emerging adult happens to stay for Sunday school, it’s very likely to be in a post-college-age group. It’s hard for them to meet somebody who is 39 or 62 to get to know them and say, "Here’s what I’ve learned in life" (Beaty, 2009).

The question becomes not “what can we do for emerging adults?”, but “what can we do with emerging adults?” In order to meet this question, we will outline a few strategies and concepts that have been proven to be successful in multiple contexts. As Smith warned, “The two key words are engagement and relationships. It can’t just be programs or classes or handing them over to the youth pastor. Real change happens in relationships, and that takes active engagement” (Beaty, 2009). In each area of Christian practices this requires initiating creative and intentional ways that each create community and build relationships. Chuck Bromar states, “We don’t need leaders to create atmosphere, we need them to cultivate relationships. It’s in the context of relationships that we gain a sense of belonging. And it’s out of a sense of belonging in the church that we embrace our identity in the world” (Kinnaman, 228). In this final section, we will demonstrate a few Christian practices that can be used to engage emerging adults in the fabric of a congregation with a special focus on meeting the perceived needs of Emerging Adults in light of their common characteristics.

Hospitality

The hospitality of a warm welcome is a critical component as an emerging adult visits the church for the first time. Yet, there is a tension to be held of being welcoming and not desperate. Many churches are so hungry for emerging adults to join them they become overzealous. Drummond (2010) captured one such account, “One program leader talked about being invited to join a church committee on her very first visit to a new church. These kinds of welcomes led younger adults to feel overwhelmed and more needed than welcomed” (14). Instead of immediately inviting new comers to join established committees and groups, encourage eager congregants to start small. Train them to welcome and invite in ways that allow friendships to develop naturally and unforced. For example, invite the emerging adult and a few congregation members to lunch. Emerging adults are often overlooked for after-church lunch invitations. There is sometimes the inaccurate assumption they have other places to be more than families with young children. This is simply untrue. When emerging adults come alone, they can just slip out more quickly.

One impactful practice is to be intentional in inviting people to share a meal in one’s home. Many do not find it as a natural response to invite people into their homes, especially those whose age stage is not like theirs. The practice of intentionally and sincerely inviting emerging adults into your home and social circles is valued because of how rare it is. There are many reasons for this whether lack of time, insecurity about being “cool enough”, and a fear of vulnerability. It is imperative to encourage congregants these are normal feelings and hurdles, which
can be overcome with practice. Inviting emerging adults into one's home contrasts to common suggestion of mentoring in that it requires different levels of vulnerability and accountability. Compared to just warmly greeting someone at church, a person's home instantly communicates what is valued and what time and resources are invested in. The emerging adult's need for stability and identity exploration, and examining possibilities are met in experiences like this because of the opportunity to compare and imagine they too could live like this (Arnett, 2012). The desire for authenticity is also met because life can be seen up close. There is not much hiding that can occur. Sharing meals together is a meaningful start. Creating them together is even better. As a meal is co-created, the parties share in not only the consumption experience, but the shared experience of creating. Whether the meal is a roaring success or an abysmal failure, culture is created all the same (Crouch, 2008).

Another tested method in the area of hospitality goes one step deeper. The inviting them “along” concept that has been a staple of youth ministry for decades is also very effective with emerging adults. Bo Boshers and Judson Poling term this the “Be With” factor (Boshers, 110). Because of the emerging adult characteristic of being “self-focused”, they have very few to answer to, so in turn their discretionary time to be very flexible. (Arnett 2004, 2007, 2012) Once a basic relationship is established, congregants can be encouraged and trained to invite emerging adults into their lives in appropriate and wise ways. For example, it would not be appropriate for an elderly man to invite over a 19 year old girl all alone. With established guidelines, this opens up a “sea of possibilities. For the inviter, it requires little additional time to intentionally invite emerging adult to join in daily tasks of play or work. Prime opportunities would be to invite an emerging adult along on a grocery-shopping trip or for a morning of weeding the landscaping. Shared experiences like these create opportunities for meaningful conversation as well as the feeling of being included in the community in deep and vivid ways. It is a mutually beneficial experience because each inviter and the invitee have the opportunity to experience, the joy of community and accomplishment, as well as the enriched gift of time (Bass, 2001.)

One practical idea would be to host a “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” party. Invite each participant to bring an ingredient for a dish. Arrange the tasks for the construction of the meal and the space in such a way that the emerging adults and emerged adults are placed on the same “teams”, assigned to the tasks of setting the table, mixing salads, concocting punch, arranging furniture, and so on. For dinner, have conversation starters or open-ended story driven questions prepared to add when the conversation begins to wane.

Giving Generously

Emerging adults might not have much income, but they have time. The emerging adult characteristic of identity exploration and their move beyond egocentrism to exocentrism are both aided by intentionally serving others. (Arnett 2004, 2007, 2012) While serving, they can “try on” positive identities and stories that could become part of their perceived self long-term. For example an emerging
adult could serve as a middle school small group co-leader. As they mentor students, the emerging adult will begin to own their “adulthood” as well as discover the progression of their maturity. The middleschooler’s perspective will directly illuminate how the emerging adult previously thought, and how their thought processes have “matured”. Additionally, serving others naturally moves individuals from focusing narrowly on personal problems to seeing the challenges of others.

It is critical to not to place emerging adults in serving roles solely to fulfill desperate needs. The more ideal situation would be for emerged adults to serve alongside emerging adults thus increasing the opportunities for mentorship, modeling, and relationship building. One of the benefits will be shifted perspectives for all involved. Emerged adults will gain the enthusiasm, fresh perspective, and the gift of learning with and from the emerging adult and middle school students. Emerging adults will find their voice as well as witness that they aren’t viewed as a volunteer workforce. Middleschool students will see a fuller spectrum of living for Christ in all ages and stages of life.

Depending on the culture of the church, to successfully engage emerging adults in service they may need to be intentionally invited. Many do not see themselves as “old enough” to join in and automatically assume roles are already established. When invested, the emerging adult's characteristic of seeing all the possibilities will bless everyone for they often will see far more of what could be possible within the ministry than most. One tension to manage will be the youthful enthusiasm for new ideas and possibilities with established memories of past successes and failures.

One practical idea would be to construct a Serving U Day. This would be a day compiled with multiple projects of varying degrees of physical requirement people could choose to join in on church grounds and/or in the community. The leadership team should intentionally invite emerging adults individually as well as invite any established emerging adults group to join in every aspect of the day including the planning of it by coordinating projects or helping with promotion.

Sharing Stories

The Emerging Adult's need for stability is squarely met in the sharing of stories. As emerging adults hear the stories of God’s faithfulness in the midst of instability and uncertainty, anchors of faith can be planted. While searching for their identity, emerging adults are the collectors of stories. They collect stories of what is possible and what isn’t. Every story heard is being sifted through the self-focused lens of the possible and forming their identity and categories of fiction fantasy, and reality. “Formative stories are often stories heard in childhood, in the home, school, synagogue, and camp, or wherever stories are shared, casually or formally, which influence us and help shape us. These stories guide us to become the adult person. These formative stories, whether they are personal, family, biblical, or folk stories, continually nourish children because they give them a sense of knowing who they are as a member of a cultural group and a family, what the group values” (Schram, 2003, 12-13).
Hearing and sharing living stories meet the needs of more than just emerging adults. They are needed by the whole people of God. Stories bind people together while revealing the bigger picture of God. Bible stories reveal the truth that the entire people of God living at one time are named a generation who are called to work together to participate in God’s work (Kinnaman, 202). As a congregation shares a meta-narrative of creation, brokenness, hope, and restoration, emerging adults catch the bigger picture of what was, is, can, and will be.

One practical idea is to create a sermon series on “Stories” or host “Tell Me a Story” Sharing Nights. As a team, gather together people of mixed ages. Intentionally and personally invite a few of them to come and share stories around a central theme for example: hope, fear, or restoration. Invite the selected few to each share a ten to fifteen minute story from their life, which is relevant to the topic. Make sure to give them a few parameters, for example not to share their entire story from birth to present and to include important who, what, where components. Or, if there are tight time constraints, recruit a gifted interviewer and equip each individual with a short set of questions such as: “What and where did the story occur?”, “Who was there?”, “What was the challenge or issue in the story?”, and “How did God make himself known to you in that time?”

Taken together, these Christian practices form and shape emerging adults into community with others, and propel them into further relationship with God and with the church. Christian practices, over time, will enable and encourage emerging adults to re-engage church life in a more committed and deeper way.

**Conclusion**

This article has attempted to describe the various characteristics of emerging adults, Christian practices, and provide a few practical ways in which practitioners can utilize these concepts. In short, emerging adults are a vital part of the Christian church bursting with potential. As we understand, build relationships with, and serve alongside emerging adults, we will be blessed by what they have to offer the church. As the question shifts from “what can the church do for emerging adults?” to “what can we do alongside them?” and by intentionally creating meaningful experiences and artifacts the culture changes. Emerging adults become part of the fabric of the adult church rather than addendums to it. Then, as they share their perspective and story in the midst of asking, “who am I”, “what am I doing here”, “where am I going”, and “what am I created for”, they aren’t alone. A faith community surrounds them with grounded and rooted people who will demonstrate in tangible ways what sincere community can look like. As Kinnaman writes, “Young Jesus-followers need older Christians to share the rich, fulfilling wine of faith, and the established church needs new wineskins into whom we can pour the church’s future. We need each other” (202).
References


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