

STORY | THEOLOGY | VOICE

# FULLER

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“When you know the story to which you belong, and when you know your role in that story, you have a profound sense of purpose. That is what we are invited into: God’s ongoing work in this world. When we find ourselves contributing to a greater story, we thrive.”

—PAMELA EBSTYNE KING, PETER L. BENSON ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF APPLIED DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE,  
ON HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE FIND THEIR COORDINATES, P. 60. (ABOVE: YENA CHOI, P. 24)





## INTRODUCTION

by Kara Powell, Guest Theology Editor

*Who am I?  
Where do I fit?  
What difference do I make?*

As in previous eras, today’s young people navigate these three key developmental questions.

The first is a question about **identity**.

The second is a question of **belonging**.

The third is a question of **purpose**.

While questions of identity, belonging, and purpose cut across all life stages, young people feel them particularly intensely. Sadly, today’s young people often adopt unsatisfactory responses to these questions—responses that leave them both disillusioned and disappointed.

The time it takes today’s young people to navigate these three quests is often different than previous generations. On one hand, their journey toward adulthood has sped up. On the other hand, it has slowed down. Way down. Young people are older

when they turn the corners of identity, belonging, and purpose (such as first marriage, childbearing, and long-term career) typically equated with full adulthood. At Fuller and elsewhere, the term “emerging adults” is now used to describe 18- to 26-year-olds who no longer consider themselves adolescents but have yet to see themselves as adults. In this theology section, our new Youth, Family, and Culture faculty member Steven Argue tackles some of the questions you may have had in your own family or church related to the twentysomethings around you.

*¿Quién soy yo?  
¿Dónde encajo?  
¿Qué diferencia hago?*

Tal como en la eras previas, la juventud de hoy navega estas tres preguntas claves de desarrollo.

La primera pregunta es sobre **desarrollo**.

La segunda pregunta es sobre **pertenencia**.

La tercera pregunta es sobre **propósito**.

Mientras que las preguntas sobre identidad, pertenencia y propósito trascienden todas las etapas de la vida, la juventud las sienten intensamente. Tristemente, la juventud de hoy a menudo adoptan respuestas insatisfactorias a estas preguntas – respuestas que les dejan tanto con decepción y desilusión.

El tiempo que le toma a la juventud de hoy

de navegar estas preguntas es muchas veces diferente a las generaciones previas. Por una parte, su trayectoria a la adultez se ha acelerado. Por otro lado, se ha vuelto más lenta. Mucho más lenta. La gente joven es más vieja cuando hacen la transición de la identidad, pertenencia y propósito (tal como el primer matrimonio, dar a luz o una carrera a largo plazo) típicamente igualada con la adultez plena. En Fuller y en todas partes, el término “juventud

*나는 누구인가?  
내가 있을 곳은 어디인가?  
나는 어떤 의미 있는 일을 하는가?*

과거에 그랬듯이 오늘날의 젊은이들 역시 인간의 발달에 있어 핵심이라 할 수 있는 이 세 가지 질문의 답을 찾고 있습니다.

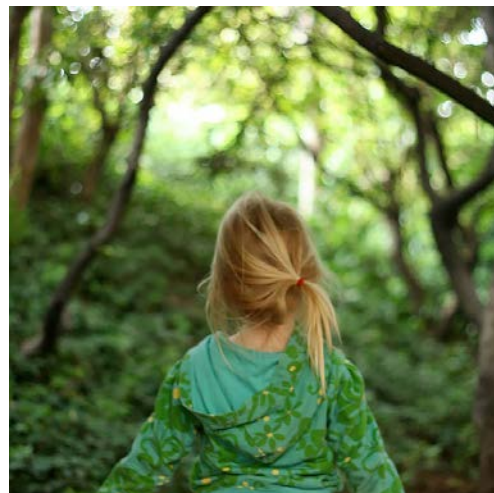
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정체성, 소속감, 목적에 관한 질문은 시기를 막론하고 평생 안고 가는 것이지만, 젊은 사람들이 체감하는 강도는 사뭇 강렬합니다. 슬프게도 오늘날 많은 젊은이가 이 질문에 바람직하지 않게 대처하고 있으며, 그로 인해 환멸과 실망에 빠지고 있습니다.

이 세 가지 탐색 여행에서 오늘날 젊은이들이 길을 찾는 데 소요하는 시간은 이전 세대와 많이 다릅니다. 이들은 한편으로 더 빠른 속도로 성인기에 들어선다고 할 수 있지만, 반대로 그 여정의 속도가 아주 많이 늦춰졌다고도 할 수 있습니다. 일반적으로 완전한 성인기의 기준으로 삼는 것은 정체성, 소속감, 목적이 발현되는 순간들(초혼, 출산, 취업등의)인데 이런 순간들을 넘어서면서 청년들은 한층 성숙해집니다. 근래에는 미성년자는 아니지만 그렇다고 스스로



Against the backdrop of these challenges, the good news—the gospel-sized news—is that the person and message of Jesus Christ offer compelling and lasting responses to these questions. Our longing for identity, belonging, and purpose are best fulfilled through the unmerited **grace** of God through Jesus Christ, the unconditional **love** of community, and the unparalleled **purpose** of kingdom mission.

Today’s young people grapple with these questions and their fulfillment in unprecedented ways through the mediation of

digital technology and in the context of an increasingly multiethnic culture. We’ve drawn from the expertise of Fuller alumni Art Bamford and Marcos Canales to explore some of the implications of these new and complex realities.

As we have seen in our last six years of Sticky Faith work, and as we observe in the classroom and in conversations every day, congregations and families are eager for a deeper theology and a wider set of tools to help them journey with teenagers and emerging adults. The articles in this

theology section of *FULLER* magazine will help you do the same by drawing from the cross-disciplinary field of *practical theology* to apply thoughtful integrative scholarship to everyday questions. It’s precisely this type of approach to theology that inspired the commissioning of the Fuller Youth Institute more than a decade ago, and we’re thrilled to share some of that fruit in the pages ahead. We hope it will spark fruitful dialogue in your home, church, counseling office, or local coffee shop. And we especially hope that dialogue will include the voices of young people themselves.

emergente” es ahora utilizado para describir a las personas de 18 a 26 años de edad que ya no se consideran adolescentes pero todavía no se ven como personas adultas. En esta sección de Teología, nuestro nuevo integrante de la facultad de Juventud, Familia y Cultura Steven Argue aborda algunas de las preguntas que usted pueda haber tenido en su propia familia o iglesia relacionadas a las personas en sus veintes alrededor de usted.

En contra del contexto de estos retos, las buenas noticias – noticias del tamaño del evangelio – es que la persona y el mensaje de Jesucristo ofrece respuestas convincentes y duraderas a estas preguntas. Nuestro anhelo de identidad, pertenencia y propósito es óptimamente cumplido por medio de la inmerecida **gracia** de Dios por medio de Jesucristo, el amor incondicional de la comunidad y el **propósito** incomparable de la misión del reino.

La juventud de hoy lucha con estas preguntas y las responden en formas sin precedente por medio de la mediación de tecnología digital y en el contexto de una creciente cultura multiétnica. Hemos tomado de la experiencia de los exalumnos Art Bamford y Marcos Canales para explorar algunas de las implicaciones de estas realidades nuevas y complejas.

성인이라고 생각하지 않는 18세에서 26세 사이를 지칭하는 ‘성인 발현기’ (emerging adults)라는 용어를 풀러와 다른 곳에서 사용하고 있습니다. 이번 호의 ‘신학’ 부문에서는 풀러의 청년, 가족, 문화 담당 선임 교수인 스티븐 아규(Steven Argue)가 여러분이 가정이나 교회의 20대와 관련해서 그동안 품어왔을 법한 몇 가지 질문에 대해 고찰합니다.

있는 커다란 기쁜 소식은 바로 예수 그리스도와 그분의 메시지가 위의 질문에 대해 영원하고 깊은 호소력을 지닌 답들을 제시한다는 사실입니다. 정체성, 소속감, 목적을 향한 우리의 갈망을 가장 잘 채워주는 것은 예수 그리스도를 통한 하나님의 공로 없이 주신 은혜, 공동체의 조건 없는 사랑, 하나님 나라 사명이라는 비할 데 없는 목적입니다.

다민족 문화 가운데서 전례 없는 방식으로 이 질문에 대한 답을 고심하고 있습니다. 이 복합적인 새로운 현실이 갖는 함의를 탐색하는 일에 풀러 동문인 아트 뱌포드(Art Bamford)와 마코스 커넬스(Marcos Canales)가 전문지식을 활용해 도움을 주었습니다.

우리의 상황은 도전으로 가득하지만, 복음이라 할 수

오늘날 젊은이들은 디지털 기술의 혜택과 심화되는







## GROWING YOUNG

Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, Brad Griffin

College degree freshly in hand, Alexis moved from the Midwest to Washington, DC, convinced she was going to change the world. Like so many young professionals, she was drawn to our nation's capital by its high concentration of nonprofit organizations and the chance to influence national and global policy.

"Doing good" was at the top of her to-do list.

Finding a church was not.

During Alexis's first weekend in town, she heard music coming from a festival in a nearby park and decided to check it out. She strolled through the grass, thrilled to find dozens of community organizations offering opportunities to make a difference.

Alexis was particularly drawn to a simple table with a large banner that read, "Foster the City." "Foster the City's aim," the two young adult volunteers shared, "is to reverse the foster care wait list in our city. We're going to line up more families who want to adopt than the hundreds in DC's foster care system who need a home. It's a huge problem and a huge goal, but we've been making steady progress."

Alexis was ready to sign up and help however she could. She wasn't in a position to adopt, but she was willing to donate and share the need with others. As the three continued their conversation, Alexis eventually learned that these volunteers weren't just part of a nonprofit organization—they were part of a church: The District Church, led by Fuller grads Aaron Graham (DMiss '13) and Justin Fung (MA '09).

This new church plant lived to be "a church for the city"—that was actually their motto. The congregation coordinated not only Foster

the City in DC but also several other social justice initiatives in the surrounding neighborhoods. The more Alexis asked about the activities and overall spirit of the church, the more she felt like this was a church she could imagine joining. While finding a church was nowhere on Alexis's list initially, The District Church leaped to the top because of how it incarnated Jesus in its community.

One year later, as the Fuller Youth Institute's research team visited her church, Alexis was deeply involved as a worship leader and small group member. When asked what she loved about her congregation, Alexis reiterated its involvement in the community. "I love that I met these people at a festival," she said. "I didn't need to be looking for Jesus or a church to find them. They were out there doing their thing as opposed to a lot of churches that try to get you to come to their events in the church building."

The church's primary focus at the festival was not to promote their Sunday service but to make their city a better place. Alexis continued, "Everyone in our city wants to change the world, but this church makes that tangible in a manner I have never seen before in a church. It teaches you how to apply your faith to the culture so you can interact with the world as God intends."

The District Church sacrifices neither depth nor theology as it positively engages with culture and makes a difference in the world. Alexis is hooked, and so are hundreds of young professionals and adults. Like many others in our recent study, this church carries out its life and ministry in a way that speaks to young people.

**THE DISCOURAGING NEWS ABOUT CHURCHES IN AMERICA** You may have heard some bad news about the church in America. The truth is that most



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Jake Mulder (MDiv '16) is director of strategic initiatives at the Fuller Youth Institute. His ministry and professional experience includes serving as a youth pastor, ministry director with Youth for Christ, and missionary with Youth With a Mission in Europe and Asia.



Brad Griffin (MDiv '07) is associate director of the Fuller Youth Institute. A speaker, blogger, and youth pastor, he is the coauthor of several *Sticky Faith* resources as well as the book *Can I Ask That? 8 Hard Questions about God and Faith*.

churches are not growing, and they aren't getting any younger.

According to an extensive survey by the Pew Research Center, the share of adults in the United States who identify as Christians fell from 78 to 71 percent between 2007 and 2014. The corresponding increase in those who identify as "religiously unaffiliated" (meaning atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular") jumped by almost seven points, from just over 16 to 23 percent.<sup>1</sup> The more our research team explored, we also discovered that *no major Christian tradition is growing in the United States today.*<sup>2</sup>

What's more, churches tend to skew old. While young adults ages 18–29 make up 17 percent of the US adult population, they represent less than 10 percent of churchgoers.<sup>3</sup>

The data is clear that shrinking and aging are the default for most American congregations today. But that's not the way it has to be. And it's not happening in every church. Four years ago, we set out to learn from churches that were bucking this trend.

#### FULLER'S RESEARCH ON "BRIGHT SPOT" CHURCHES

The team at the Fuller Youth Institute spent the past four years studying The District Church and over 250 other congregations of diverse sizes, ethnicities, and geographic regions that are unlocking the potential of teenagers and emerging adults. Using an exemplar research method, these evangelical, mainline, Roman Catholic, and nondenominational churches were identified by 35 nominators and subsequently narrowed down in three stages of research.<sup>4</sup> It's been one of the largest and most collaborative studies ever conducted on the topic, involving over 20 denominations, 25 expert advisors, 1,500 research participants,

and 10,000 hours of staff research time. Nearly 30 interdisciplinary Fuller faculty members participated in the project in some way, along with over 45 Fuller student and alumni research assistants from all three of Fuller's schools.

Through this study our team has discovered the shared core commitments of congregations that are not aging and shrinking, but are *growing*, and growing *young*. (See ChurchesGrowingYoung.org for more details regarding these six core commitments and other research findings.) Like us, you might be surprised not only by what these churches have done, but also by what they haven't done. In fact, they're busting some of the greatest myths commonly held as essential to reaching young people.

#### A FEW SURPRISES ABOUT WHAT CHURCHES DON'T NEED TO GROW YOUNG

When you hear about a church like District, you might assume this kind of growth is reserved for newer church plants and young, hip leaders. While some churches in our study held this profile, the vast majority did not. According to our research, there's a list of surprising factors we *didn't* find common among churches in our study that engage young people well. Here are a few of them:

*A precise size.* While we all know leaders who advocate for small churches or large ones, we saw no statistical relationship between church size (or budget size) and effectiveness.

*An exact age.* We learned just as much and recorded just as much life change in churches over a century old as in churches barely five years old. When it comes to churches that grow young, there is no age discrimination.

*A particular denomination.* When we started

our study, we wondered if the churches that rose to the top would skew toward particular denominational or nondenominational leanings. While it's true that some denominations are shrinking or aging faster than average, God is working in a stunning variety of churches.

*A "contemporary" worship service.* It's not that worship style is unimportant; it's that there is no one "right" worship style for teenagers and emerging adults. While the churches we visited were likely to prefer modern worship in some or all of their worship contexts, they didn't depend on that alone as a magnet to draw young people.

*A big, modern building.* Some of the congregations that are most effective with young people have new, state-of-the-art facilities. However, the majority of the churches we studied gather in decent but not spectacular spaces. Some don't own their facilities and are creatively meeting in local schools, community centers, and living rooms. For teenagers and young adults, feeling at home transcends any building.

Reflecting on the factors that are not necessary in churches that engage young people well, our team was encouraged by the fact that most any church can better engage young people. The shifts that are needed to do so are not quick and easy, but our research does help shed light on the best places to focus time and energy.

#### A COMPELLING VISION TO BE THE BEST NEIGHBORS

The story of The District Church highlights one of those important shifts in congregational culture, which is that churches growing young strive to be the best neighbors, both locally and globally. They wisely maintain a delicate balance as they interact with our



culture and world. On the one hand, they do not simply mimic the surrounding culture, indiscriminately patterning their lives and activities after what they see around them. On the other hand, they are not so different or separate from the world that they lose their ability to relate.

Instead, these churches recognize the careful dance that values both fidelity to Scripture's commands for holiness as well as knowing and graciously loving their neighbors. This dance affects how they serve, pursue justice, help teenagers and emerging adults find their calling, interact with popular culture, and respond to heated cultural issues. Much more than developing detailed policies or releasing theological position papers, these churches train and infuse their young people with an integrated discipleship that enables them to thrive in our complex world.

A number of young adults from The District Church explained that in the often-polarized culture of DC, they've learned that as Christians they need to earn the right to be heard before assuming others will want to listen. We continued to hear this theme from young people in other churches, often referencing Jesus' teaching on what it means to be a neighbor. Consistently demonstrated in both our statistical data and experience on the ground, eventually we began to identify this desire among exemplary churches as "being the best neighbors." Over time it became clear that this characteristic is part of a cluster of commitments held in common by churches growing young.

As you might expect, we found that offering young people a thoughtful path to neighboring well is anything but easy, even in exemplary churches. When leaders in our study identified the biggest challenges

their church faces in ministering to teenagers and emerging adults, one out of three named challenges navigating culture. The most frequently named cultural obstacles include the difficulty of keeping their church relevant and the pressure on young people to conform to popular cultural norms.

In the midst of these struggles, young people often lead the way forward. When interview participants in our study were asked what makes their church effective with young people, nearly 60 percent named service practices, missional practices, or generally being outward oriented. Further, when we posed the question "What is a practice in your congregation that indicates commitment from or growth in young people?" to leaders, nearly 70 percent named ways young people serve.

#### **MORE CONVERSATIONS, FEWER IMMEDIATE CONCLUSIONS**

While the path to neighboring well is not always clear, teenagers and emerging adults consistently described how much they care about their church's process or journey for arriving at particular beliefs, positions, and statements. Especially when it comes to heated cultural issues like politics, interreligious dialogue, or homosexuality, a church's predetermined agenda can become hard for young people to stomach. When churches seem closed to dialogue, young people often look elsewhere for more palatable conversations about issues that matter most to them.

While the churches in our study that neighbor well are anything but theological lightweights, they often demonstrate a generous spirit in the face of differing opinions. When interview participants describe their church, they are eight times more likely to mention the diversity of beliefs in their church than the similarities.

No matter where churches growing young fall on the theological spectrum, they place emphasis on essential beliefs that can be shared rather than exaggerating various differences. In this way, those both inside and outside the church whose convictions do not match the church's feel welcome to join the conversation.

Throughout our study we heard from several young people who do not completely align with their church's stance on one or more controversial issues, but nevertheless remain part of the church because they respect the process by which decisions are made. One 18-year-old from Minnesota shared, "We talk about the big social issues . . . we definitely engage those. But we don't tell people what to think about them. And that is what I really love. I have never felt awkward asking one of the leaders, 'What do you think about this?' because I know they're not going to tell me exactly what to think. Instead, they engage me in conversation. And then through that, we can derive together the ways that we should live out our beliefs."

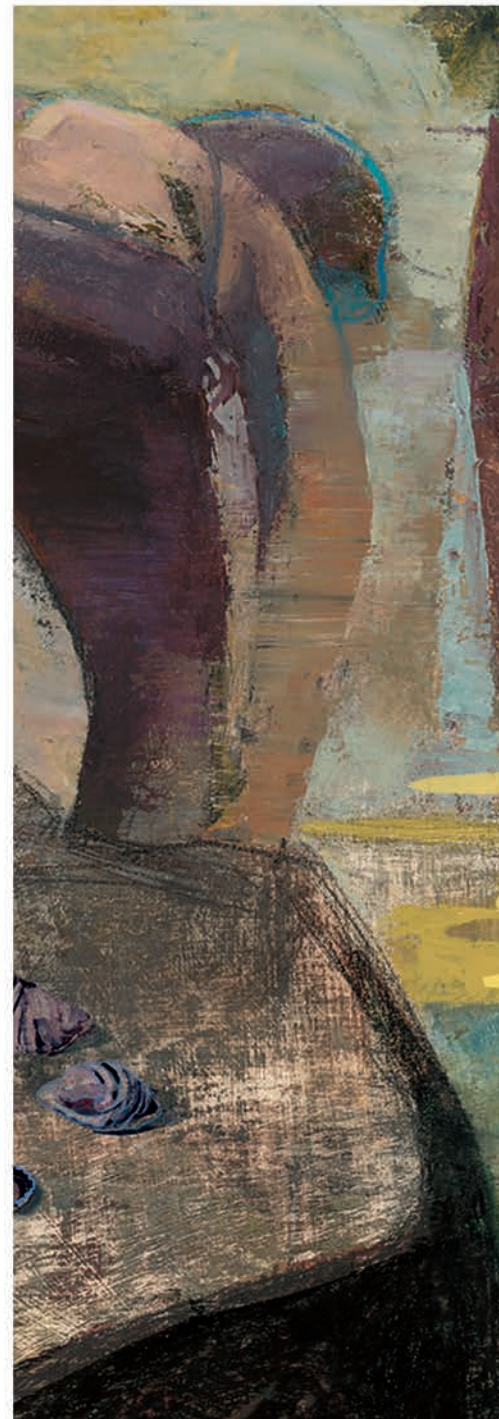
Respecting the journey seems particularly vital when navigating one of the most fiercely contested topics in US churches today: sexual identity and gay marriage. While the churches in our study landed on all sides of these complex issues, they were united in their commitment to informed, respectful, and thoughtful dialogue. For example, one church began every discussion on same-sex questions with a reminder of every person's common need for the grace of God. Another church publicly asked forgiveness from the same-sex community for their past quick judgments and lack of grace, emphasizing the God who is bigger than any conflict or debate.

Furthermore, leaders of churches that neighbor well are sensitive to making a decision, or taking a particular theological stance, that is perceived as shutting down discussion. Rather than make decisions in a leadership vacuum, they recognize the tensions that swirl around these issues, especially for young people who may interact every day with those who identify as LGBTQ, or who may identify as having LGBTQ tendencies or attraction themselves. These church leaders avoid making blanket statements and instead try to honor all people involved as created in God's image. They make space for safe and honest dialogue so that everyone—both young and old—can share their questions, beliefs, and experiences.

As Graham shares, living out the church's motto "for the city" must be a holistic effort. The church routinely asks questions like *Do we know our neighbors?* and *Are we aware of what's happening in our neighborhoods?* They wonder what their "shalom index" looks like—the tangible impact of the church on the city's crime rate, church attendance, and other measures of well being. According to District leadership, an ideal proof of their effectiveness would be a headline in the *Washington Post* that reads, "Churches in DC Unite to Solve the Foster Care Crisis."

#### WHY CHURCH?

Many young people are finding that kind of vision worth joining. In light of rapid and complex cultural shifts, both our research and our experience reveal that an increasing number of young people today are asking, "Why should I go to church?" They lament that it feels increasingly irrelevant, unwilling to change, and perhaps even distant from what Jesus intended. Like Alexis, many of these young people initially conclude that if they really want to make a difference in the







world, their time may be best spent elsewhere. But The District Church and hundreds of other congregations nationwide hope to turn this tide and offer a compelling vision for what a vibrant, transformative faith community can be and do.

On the final day of our weekend visit to The District Church, Aaron Graham delivered a passionate sermon entitled “Why Church?” In it, he recounted why their church was founded and what it means to be a church “for the city.” While the big lie that many in DC believe is that they can change the world on their own, Graham argued that changing the world is best at-

tempted through the defining, sustainable, Spirit-empowered work of a community of believers.

Based on the nodding heads of Alexis and hundreds of other young adults in the congregation, it felt like he had struck a chord.

We’re inclined to agree.



#### ENDNOTES

1. Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.
2. Some Pentecostal denominations are seeing great growth outside of the US in Asia, Africa, and especially

in Latin America. Pew Research Center, “Why Has Pentecostalism Grown So Dramatically in Latin America?” November 14, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/11/14/why-has-pentecostalism-grown-so-dramatically-in-latin-america/>.

3. Adults ages 18–29 comprise 16.7 percent of the adult population according to a report from 2015 statistics released by the United States Census Bureau, “Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for the United States: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2015” [data file]; retrieved from <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

4. The first stage of research consisted of quantitative online surveys of pastors and youth/young adult leaders, followed by a second stage of structured quantitative and qualitative phone interviews with parishioners, and concluding with a third stage of church site visits that utilized ethnographic research methods. Special thanks to Chap Clark, Scott Cormode, Cameron Lee, and Jim Furrow for their expertise as senior research advisors throughout the project.





## WALKING WITH ETHNIC MINORITY YOUTH ON THE IDENTITY FORMATION JOURNEY

Marcos Canales

Marcos Canales (MDiv '12), originally from Costa Rica, also grew up in Peru, Ecuador, and Paraguay as the son of Peruvian Nazarene missionaries. He has been church planting among the Latina community of the greater Los Angeles area for the last ten years. During this time, he has worked with nonprofit community organizations in the areas of urban youth development, mentorship, and immigration advocacy. Currently, Canales is the pastor of La Fuente Ministries, a bilingual, intercultural, and intergenerational ministry of Pasadena First Church of the Nazarene.

**A**s a first-generation Latino<sup>1</sup> pastor who migrated to the United States from Costa Rica, I have found in Latino ministry one of my deepest pastoral concerns and theological reflections: the identity formation of our Latino youth as both Latinos and followers of Jesus Christ. I find solace in the fact that other immigrant communities and churches struggle with similar questions. Here I offer my “latinidad”<sup>2</sup> as a conversation partner with other leaders committed to ministering with this generation of ethnic minority youth.<sup>3</sup> The following observations stem from specific dynamics within the Latina reality, with the hope that they may mirror common themes present in the context of other ethnic groups.

As Latino and other minority young people wrestle with their identity, leaders can best journey alongside them by helping them navigate a hyphenated reality, creating shared spaces for storytelling, and naming systemic factors that impact their lives. In honoring the interplay of these three elements, a church community can be part of enabling a young person to know how he or she is made in God’s image and how to serve as an agent of God’s kingdom.

### NAVIGATING A HYPHENATED REALITY

No single category is capable of describing the complexities of identity formation for those who belong to an ethnic subgroup. In my experience working among Latino young people, they often find themselves caught between the message of the dominant culture, which promotes the self as a free agent (independent, autonomous, and private), and a more fluid, interdependent, relational, and embedded self defined by relationships and contexts.<sup>4</sup> This experience also resonates with other ethnic minority youth, embodying this binary tension in what is

often described as “living in the hyphen.” Whether that hyphen is Mexican-American, Korean-American, Thai-American, or Cuban-American, this expression attempts to capture the challenge of forming an identity that experiences the continual conflict between the values of individualism and collectivism, assimilation and acculturation, and dominant and ethnic culture. Thus an ethnic minority youth may experience the distress of not fully fitting in either context and having to face the daunting task of navigating the norms, verbal and nonverbal communication, relational structures, and even entertainment preferences of both contexts.

At the same time, this constant navigation is also seen as an asset, since ethnic minority youth develop a higher level of “code-switching”: a skill necessary to move among multiple worlds, conversations, tasks, and languages. Hyphenated ethnic terms like “Asian-American” convey this expressed need: both cultures and worldviews are operating and influencing the way an ethnic minority youth acts and lives in this world.

My pastoral experience has shown me that bilingual ministries often embody this hyphenated reality. The use of both Spanish and English within a worship setting conveys the reality that Latino youth inhabit every day at home. Alma,<sup>5</sup> one of our emerging Latina leaders, recently pointed out, “There are just certain things that I need to tell to God in Spanish; I *must* use Spanish. At other points in the service, English is the language that best allows me to connect with God.” Alma’s identity formation process can be embraced in the space between both languages. A bilingual gathering facilitates worship expressions that invite young people like Alma to connect to God without having to suppress one language in service to another.



### CREATING SHARED SPACES FOR STORYTELLING

The importance of storytelling for ethnic minority youth came to life for me in a new way recently. Our congregation practices a monthly rhythm of gathering in homes, bringing dishes to share in a meal, and listening to one member share his or her story. We call this *convivio*, from the word *convivencia*, which means living with and being mutually transformed by one another. During one of my congregation's *convivios*, I asked Nelson, a 15-year-old Mexican-American youth, to share his story with the gathering. Nelson told us his mother's story of immigration to and deportation from the United States; the doctor's diagnosis of encephalitis upon his birth; and his grandmother's fervent and answered prayer for his healing. He then proceeded to thank God for God's intervening grace and physical healing while at the same time bringing before God the recurring question, "How long before I am reunited with my mom?"

The congregation responded to Nelson's story by reflecting back to him the specific ways they have witnessed God's healing power in Nelson's life, and came to share Nelson's deepest longing to be united with his mom despite his undocumented status. After a time of prayer and affirmation for the gift that Nelson is to our community, he commented, "This is weird! Now you know all my secrets. You're like family now!" The congregation needed to hear and witness his story, and Nelson needed to process, explain, and make meaning of his story in the midst of his community. Nelson would later tell me that on that day he felt affirmed, both as a Latino and as a follower of Christ. He did not need to hide the "shameful" parts of his story, but rather he began to realize that those were the places where God's love was amplified.

A congregation that fosters safe spaces for young people to share their own or their families' stories of immigration, oppression, and/or violence both in the youth group setting as well as with the entire congregation deeply impacts a young person's identity formation process. The young person is not left to make meaning of his or her complex experiences alone, but is helped by the community to bring together what otherwise may seem like fragmented parts of the young person's identity. This means that a church committed to God's mission within and alongside ethnic minority youth must reconsider which narratives are being overlooked. At the same time, it must be ready to come alongside the young person to help him or her recognize and identify how God has intervened and been present in that young person's familial and cultural story.

Helping young people tell their stories may take the form of intentionally accompanying a student as he or she creates an ethnic/cultural autobiography<sup>6</sup> through music, art, poetry, an essay, dance, film, or an alternative hands-on project. Ethnic minority youth, beyond their earnest desire for recognition and popularity in social media, long to be listened to, affirmed, and encouraged by a community that gives witness to their unique development as children of God. Beyond the "likes," "comments," or the number of "followers" they may have on social media, a person's journey is always best explored, understood, and celebrated in face-to-face interactions in the life of a redemptive community: the church.

### NAMING SYSTEMIC FACTORS

Another element that adds to the complexity of identity formation for ethnic minority youth is the reality of systems. Ministry at and within the margins must

"One of the delights of my life is spending time with the children of immigrants, who tend to be young people raised with more than one cultural lens. They have this wonderful capacity to see in more complex ways and can draw on the richness of more than one culture. If they can learn to navigate the tensions of multiple views, it becomes such a gift in their lives and in our churches. These young people are the future of our multicultural world, God's agents in the transformation of our communities and cities. One of the questions we love asking at Fuller is, How do we help them be all they can be, valuing their unique gifts for the church and the world?"

+ *Judith ("Jude") Tiersma Watson is associate professor of urban mission in Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies.*

"For me, a bilingual and transnational emerging adult, identity and its role in faith is a daily question. I love God and the church, but straddling multiple cultures and ideologies has led to more questions than answers. As a 1.5-generation Latina, I am excited to see the faith lived out in my *abuelitos* and parents become the rich soil my generation needs to grow in the changing landscape of our time. But my generation also needs the church to rethink an ecclesiology where multilingual and multicultural young people actually fit."

+ *Jennifer Guerra Aldana is a Fuller MDiv student, associate pastor, and new member of the Fuller Youth Institute team. Read her story on page 12.*





## THE POWER OF TOGETHER: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMMIGRANT CHURCH

What does attending an immigrant church as a second-generation youth look like? Often it means not knowing what to say to adults and sitting in services you may barely understand, followed by eating a good deal of food that you do know very well. You grow up with a sense that church is both like home and very foreign all at the same time. You are one of the people, but also an outsider. You are in a constant liminal space, existing between two worlds.

For *first-generation* immigrants who are ethnic minorities, the immigrant church experience is vastly different. Church is more than a space of worship and spiritual experience; often it is a safe haven for those enduring the harsh realities of life as a minority. It is a place where people who feel like strangers in a new country find solace in others like them—a place to validate their personhood when experiencing oppression and marginalization. It is familiar, it is family, and it is home.

The question then becomes, How can these two very different generations exist as one in the immigrant church setting? Faced with research showing that young people often leave their congregations and faith after high school, how does the

name the systems that interact and intersect with a young person's understanding of self in relation to his or her community. As Elizabeth Conde-Frazier explains, the "ecological approach to the spiritual formation of youth" becomes crucial in identifying the social structures and networks that form and support the development of Latino/a adolescents.<sup>7</sup> She describes a series of concentric circles, beginning with the young person in the center, moving out to the family, a local faith community, a local civic community, and culture.<sup>8</sup> The role of a local faith community as it engages in all surrounding circles provides a tremendous impact upon the life of the young person so that both life-nurturing as well as life-oppressing systems are named, explored, and when necessary, condemned as countering the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> Educational, policing, and economic systems in a community that tend to exclude our young people based on their color of skin, socioeconomic status, or zip code must be named as contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, rites of passage—such as quinceañeras, local art, music and dance—as well as alternative economic support systems must be acknowledged as resonating with God's heart for well being and justice. For example, I recall celebrating God's provision after the fundraising efforts of the Barragan family as they sold homemade tacos to neighbors and friends for the funeral expenses of a family member in Mexico. Yet as we envision rites of passage that reflect God's heart for justice, we must recognize and understand the impact that systemic factors have on our youth and their families *before* setting up programs that we assume will most impact their identity formation. We first need to take time to discern the spaces where the majority of their lives

happen and where they are being formed and impacted as humans.

A practical step stemming from this observation is that leaders can drive, walk, or bike through the neighborhood alongside an ethnic minority youth so that the leader can see a community through a young person's eyes and process together what they observe. It is extremely important to know where young people and their respective families live, play, shop, eat, and conduct business, for this is where they are being shaped the most in the intersection of various systems. During my first pastorate, I asked Mario, an 18-year-old former gang member, to take me to the most important part of the city. He took me to the swap meet. This particular swap meet embodied an alternative economic system within the city while also hosting entire family outings and recreational spaces. Ministering in this community with Latino youth taught me to always ask the question, "Where do families gather when they are not working?"

What are the informal gathering places for our youth and their respective families that speak to their systemic realities?" Leaders working with ethnic minority youth must take the time to understand these often invisible forces so they can help young people navigate them more explicitly as part of their identity formation process as children of God.

This discussion of a hyphenated reality, shared spaces for storytelling, and the naming of systems provides just an initial introduction into the factors influencing the formation process of ethnic minority youth. But these factors can serve as helpful front doors through which to enter into a young person's reality and begin walking alongside him or her on this journey. As the United States continues to move toward an increasingly multicultural society, the fostering of identity formation among ethnic minority youth will be an imperative for the church.

As a Latino pastor, I am aware that it is

immigrant church create an environment of warmth and welcome that becomes a home for all generations?

The immigrant church is ultimately a mission field. It is a church in which two different cultures and languages converge together to make a third culture—a community of believers. A great deal of reconciliation may need to happen for all generations to dwell together as the family of God. Ultimately, this leads the immigrant church community to the cross as the source for not only personal but also communal reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> Reconciliation helps us transcend our differences and remember we are children of God—worshiping, serving, and living together peacefully so that the world may know Jesus' love.

Miroslav Volf reminds us, “[N]o culture can retain its own tribal deities; religion must be de-ethnicized so that ethnicity can be de-sacralized. Paul deprived each culture of ultimacy in order to give them all legitimacy in the wider family of cultures.”<sup>2</sup> The first generation in an immigrant church can no longer hold onto the mindset that their culture, heritage, language, or way of doing things is the right and best way. On the flip side, the second generation must embrace those who are marginalized and oppressed, often represented in their parents' generation.

The church of Ephesus in Paul's day did not create two separate churches but rather, through both conflict and reconciliation, figured out how to be a *household of God* together for the *missio Dei*, the mission of God on earth. If the immigrant church is to thrive when it comes to engaging the next generation, then all generations must join together—to speak each other's languages, live in each other's cultures, and welcome one another with warmth. We must figure out how to embody the holistic fellowship Scripture commands. In this mindset of togetherness, the immigrant church will live out its call for the *missio Dei* not just for other immigrants, but for the entire world.

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1. M. Sydney Park, Soong-Chan Rah, and Al Tizon, eds., *Honoring the Generations: Learning with Asian North American Congregations* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2012), 7.
2. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 49.

crucial for our congregation to affirm our emerging leaders' bilingual identity and bicultural gifts so they are able to minister not just within the Latina church, but also beyond it. I love dreaming with young people, their parents, and the rest of the congregation not just about how our youth can understand their bicultural world, but also how they can help shape it.



#### ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this work, I use the terms “Latino” and “Latina” interchangeably. I acknowledge, along with Juan Martínez, that Spanish is a gender-specific language and that the problem of gender inclusivity is not solved by this choice. However, unless otherwise noted as female or male, “Latino” and “Latina” will be used to refer to all people of Latin American descent. See Juan Francisco Martínez Jr., *Los Protestantes: An Introduction to Latino Protestantism in the United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), Kindle loc. 63–64.
2. “Latinidad” describes a subjective account of what it means to be Latino in a particular context. Thus “latinidad” varies in its expression according to a person's country of origin, culture, and language.
3. For the sake of this work, I choose the term “ethnic minority youth” as a way to broaden the conversation out of the

particularity of my Latino context and experience. I recognize that I cannot speak on behalf of all other ethnic minorities (or all Latinos for that matter), but I hope that these reflections shed light on some of the complexities found in the process of identity formation for young people acquainted with marginalized experiences.

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5. All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.
6. Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez, *Churches, Cultures & Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 17–18. This book models the kinds of questions that need to be formulated in order for ethnic minority youth to grasp and share their own stories.
7. Ken Johnson-Mondragón, *Pathways of Hope and Faith among Hispanic Teens: Pastoral Reflections and Strategies Inspired by the National Study of Youth and Religion* (Stockton, CA: Instituto Fe y Vida, 2007), 225–26.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 230–32. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier contributes an excellent Christian discernment model for the integration of Latino/a moral youth development and social conscience and action. Based on educator David White's four movements of discernment for social action, listening, understanding, remembering and dreaming, and acting become the ongoing work of naming the systems in the social fabric of ethnic minority youth.





## MOVING FROM PERFORMANCE TO PURPOSE IN YOUTH SPORTS

Benjamin J. Houltberg

Benjamin J. Houltberg is associate professor of human development in Fuller's Department of Marriage and Family. His expertise centers on relational factors that impact emotional health in high-stress environments, with much of his current work on the role of identity development and character virtues in sport as they relate to emotional health and athletic performance. He is a founding member of and actively involved in Hope Sports, a nonprofit organization that unites athletes to bring hope to the world. He works with coaches and athletes from around the world to promote spiritual and emotional health in dealing with pressures to perform.

**M**illions of youth devote a substantial amount of their childhood to sports. Undoubtedly, spending this much time in any activity will impact their lives. The common adage “sports produces character” captures the prominent reason children, teenagers, and young adults are encouraged to participate in sports: an assumption that the lessons learned in sports will equate to success in life. However, research on the impact of sports participation is mixed, with some showing negative effects on youth development. Although sports can shape the lives of teenagers in powerful ways, these findings challenge the notion that sports automatically lead to positive youth outcomes, particularly a healthy identity and emotional development. Given that youth are spending so much time in sports and parents are spending so much effort and money to have their kids in sports, why not have young people's experiences in sports be as formative as possible? This article discusses important developmental processes during adolescence that are relevant to sports and highlights some research-informed approaches to help parents and caring adults engage with youth playing sports.

### ADOLESCENCE: A SEASON OF IDENTITY FORMATION

The profound physical, cognitive, and social changes associated with adolescence create an active time for identity formation when adolescents are seeking a more coherent understanding of self.<sup>1</sup> Adolescents also experience emotions more strongly and have greater difficulty regulating these emotions due, in part, to changes in the brain during this developmental period.<sup>2</sup> They also make advances in abstract thinking that allow them to become aware of their own thought processes (i.e., metacognition). The positive side of this advancement is the increased ability to think about the world in more complex ways and

integrate meaningful narratives into their self-identity.

However, this newfound ability can also enhance self-focus, as adolescents tend to create ideals and make social comparisons to see how they measure up against others. They can observe directly—and also indirectly, through social media—the “perfect world” of other teenagers. This comparison is no longer restricted by geography but extends to an endless possibility of virtual comparisons across the world. Identity formation and the ability to manage emotional responses not only are internal processes, but also are embedded in social relationships. Children and adolescents are continuously being formed by their interactions within their developmental context.

### THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACT OF YOUTH SPORTS ON IDENTITY FORMATION

So how do these changes relate to sport? Sports provide a powerful network of relationships and opportunities for promoting positive identity formation and strengthening emotion-regulation skills. Unfortunately, most adults in the world of sports have also witnessed the devastation that can occur when youth sport focuses on “winning at all costs.” One consequence of this approach is that young people begin to derive their value as human beings from their athletic performance. A young athlete quickly recognizes that affirmation comes along with winning. The media actively reinforces the message that self-worth is based in performance, and adolescents are especially vulnerable to the allure of self-importance that can accompany winning. It is the natural trajectory of a gifted adolescent to form a central part of their identity around being an athlete and, more specifically, how they perform in their sport. Coupled with the heightened sensitivity and difficulty regulating emotionality, this

can lead to a performance-based identity that can undermine the emotional health of youth and ultimately prevent young athletes from performing at their best. Even more, a performance-based identity is often celebrated in our culture and reinforced by adults within the young athlete's developmental context.

In a recent *Sports Illustrated* article, the most decorated Olympian of all time, Michael Phelps, reflected on his time in a rehabilitation center as a result of a DUI. Phelps summed up sports' tendency towards performance-based identity: "I wound up uncovering a lot of things about myself. For a long time I saw myself as the athlete that I was, but not as a human being."<sup>3</sup> This young man has lived out the athlete's fantasy: standing on the Olympic medal platform an astounding 28 times—23 of those for a gold medal! However, his self-worth based in athletic performance did not provide fulfillment or connect him to something stable. Any high achiever with a performance-based identity risks feeling devastated when they fall short of their goals; or having actually realized their dream, finding it empty. This does not minimize the value for young people in striving for excellence, but it does challenge caring adults in highly competitive contexts to invest in youth identity formation beyond just performance. This is especially important during adolescence because coherent self-narratives are being constructed based on interactions with the environment.

#### ADULTS DRIVE PERFORMANCE-BASED IDENTITY HOME

Andre Agassi, the great tennis player, reflects on his first loss at the young age of seven years old: "After years of hearing my father rant at my flaws, one loss has caused me to take up his rant. I have internalized my father—his impatience, his perfectionism, his rage—until his voice doesn't just feel like my own, it is my own. I no longer need my father to torture me. From this day on, I can do it by myself."<sup>4</sup> Agassi puts words to what is often an unconscious process for high achievers who internalize the voice of an adult that leaves them seeking a sense of worthiness in some future result.

Though it may sound extreme, Agassi's description of his interaction with his father is more common than people would like to admit. Furthermore, even subtler reactions to teenage athletes can also result in negative impact. Consider, for example, a parent's immediate response to a disappointing performance as a child walks off the soccer field or a youth worker's seemingly harmless announcement of a track star's winning performance when other members of the group were also in the race. Although one event or experience is not likely to lead to a performance-based identity, repeated interactions across time promote a mindset that links love and acceptance to performance. It is not that competition is bad or evaluation of performance should be avoided (e.g., participation ribbons for all competitors). In fact, athletic competition provides a context for youth to learn the important skill of dealing with failure that strengthens resilience. The problem arises from youth

the level of disappointment from a parent.<sup>6</sup> This discrepancy highlights the developmental changes discussed, particularly a heightened sensitivity to perceived social rejection and emotional situations. It points to the importance of intentional communication about performance and identity. Parents or caring adults may feel they are being supportive; the adolescent, however, may be experiencing and responding to a different perception (see "10 Warning Signs," below).

#### HOW ADULTS CAN HELP TEEN ATHLETES MOVE FROM PERFORMANCE TO PURPOSE

To counter a performance-based identity, adolescents need continual reminders of their human value rooted in unconditional love and connected to their unique purpose. Parents and caring adults of faith have the opportunity to point young athletes to God's unconditional love that is not based on human performance but is a result of *being* God's creation. Youth

### 10 WARNING SIGNS OF PERFORMANCE-BASED IDENTITY

- Sports are not fun anymore.
- Fear of failure is stronger than the excitement to compete.
- Anxiety increases before competition (including sleep disruption).
- Bouncing back from a disappointing performance is difficult.
- The teenager desires to quit or finds excuses not to compete.
- Self-descriptions only relate to being an athlete.
- The teenager has feelings of worthlessness when not performing well.
- The teenager ruminates on mistakes made in competition.
- Jealousy or anger is demonstrated towards others performing better.
- An obsession develops with working harder or practicing more.

viewing the result of the competition as the purpose of their existence and the main avenue to earn love. Adolescents with a performance-based identity lose the joy that attracted them to sports and replace it with a fear of disappointing others and need to protect their self-worth.

Research suggests incongruence between the reports of parents and adolescents regarding support and pressure to perform. Adolescents, especially boys, report feeling much higher levels of pressure from parents than parents are aware of.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, parents often underestimate the emotional experience of losing for adolescents, while adolescents overestimate

thrive in emotional climates where they feel loved and accepted while receiving clearly communicated expectations. A sense of identity grounded in feeling loved and based in purpose (i.e., a purpose-based identity) empowers youth to act on their gifts in healthy ways. Purpose is something meaningful to the person that is a central, self-organizing life aim leading to a positive contribution to society.<sup>7</sup> Adolescents' search to belong and feel accepted provides a tremendous window of opportunity for connecting young people to purpose. Perpetual reinforcement of purpose creates a transcendent self-narrative that moves adolescents to a broader view of self and to gain a sense



of connection to something greater.<sup>8</sup> For the young athlete with a purpose-based identity, competition is not a determiner of self-worth but an opportunity for growth and something to be enjoyed. Further, sports are seen as meaningful not just because of the joy experienced but also because of the productive engagement with others. As a result, the young athlete is able to experience the freedom to strive for excellence and maximize their potential on and off the athletic field.

Certainly Christian teachings provide a powerful framing for young people to understand self-worth rooted in God's unconditional love and purpose. However, the integration of one's faith in the context of sport can be difficult under conditions of a performance-based identity. Young athletes can perceive that their value to God requires success in sports in order to have a pedestal for evangelism or to "bring glory to God's name." This also has negative ramifications as the fear of disappointing others is extended to God. An alternative is to view participation in sports as a gift from God that reflects God's unchanging love for the athlete and provides a source of joy and an opportunity to serve others.<sup>9</sup> Thus, sports are another way to experience God's love and pleasure and connect to something greater than self.

So are sports healthy for youth? It depends on their relationships with caring adults. But the good news is that it's possible to help teen athletes move from performance to purpose.

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10. Ibid.











## *THRIVING IN URBAN MINISTRY: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PAIN AND HOPE IN THE JOURNEY OF FAITH*

Christin J. Fort

Christin J. Fort (MA '13) is a sixth-year PhD student in Fuller's Graduate School of Psychology. Her clinical interests include working with people of faith as they process the impact of difficult life experiences on their relationships with God. Her research focuses on the intersection of the theology of divine emotions and human expressions of negative emotions in the church and in therapy. When she is not working, Fort enjoys road trips, reading historical fiction and nonfiction, sharing meals with friends, and teaching Sunday school.

**L**ife in the city can be full of joy and opportunity. Yet it can also offer increased exposure to poverty, tragedy, and loss. As an African American woman born and raised in the city, much of my interest in urban ministry comes from my experiences as a native of Detroit. As a doctoral student in clinical psychology, I have been privileged to focus some of my research on work among urban youth ministry workers in the Los Angeles metro area as part of a research project completed by Associate Professor of Psychology Cynthia Eriksson and the Headington Program Research Lab at Fuller, in partnership with the Fuller Youth Institute and funded by the Tyndale House Foundation. Specifically, my research has focused on understanding how urban youth ministry workers relate with God after they have experienced a traumatic event or severe life stressor. The results of this study have been eye opening, and they have implications for urban youth ministry workers, partners, and urban young people themselves.

In 2011, I was part of a research team that set out to study how major life crises impacted urban youth ministry workers' relationships with God. Our team interviewed men and women who had been involved in ministry for an average of 10 years. These participants self-identified as black, white, Latino, and multiracial. The project explored two primary questions: (1) How do incredibly difficult experiences impact one's relationship with God when one is involved in urban ministry? and (2) What racial/ethnic group differences exist?

The project's findings were revealing. We discovered that our research participants related with God in a variety of ways following their crisis experiences. During our interviews, all of the subjects talked about

times in which relating to God felt very difficult after their crisis, and different ways that these experiences impacted them. Some of the most difficult experiences with God that urban workers described included feeling "distant" from God, "angry" toward God, and "confused" about why God allowed the situation to happen. Some of the most positive spiritual experiences included feeling "intimately connected" with God, maintaining "trust" in God in spite of the hardship, being "prayerful," and finding hope as they remembered that the call to ministry was a part of "joining" God in what he is doing here on earth.

One of the most interesting discoveries was that, in general, even when urban youth leaders noted that they felt angry, distant, confused, or experienced tension with God, they reflected a sense of openness to maintaining engagement with God in the midst of all of their uncertainty and frustration. In other words, during the interview, these participants felt comfortable reporting significant difficulty in their relationship with God but also expressed a willingness to remain engaged with God in the midst of the situation.

However, this wasn't true for everyone. It is important to note that some participants also indicated that their experiences of anger following their crisis were so distressing that they felt unable to remain engaged with God or with certain spiritual disciplines (e.g., praying or attending church) for a period of time. Although only a small percentage of urban youth leaders indicated experiencing such deep feelings of disconnection with God and/or the Christian community around them, it is noteworthy that sometimes experiences of crisis are so intense that experiencing distance from God—or



other believers—seems inevitable. Although some study participants felt unable to engage with God and/or Christian community for a time, they did eventually reengage. In fact, these same participants also spoke of experiencing a sense of openness to God and closeness with God during the interview.

Finally, we explored differences in how participants reported experiencing God and/or Christian community based on racial or ethnic group differences. In other words, we wanted to know if African American, Caucasian, or Latino participants were more or less likely to talk about their difficult experiences in a particular way during the interview. We found that there were, in fact, differences in reporting. While representatives of each ethnic group indicated experiencing all of the positive experiences with God, we noted that African American leaders did not explicitly indicate experiencing several of the negative emotions expressed by their Latino and Caucasian colleagues.

Please note that just because African American youth leaders didn't seem to explicitly indicate feelings of "anger" or "confusion" in their relationship with God during the interview, it doesn't mean that they did not experience those feelings. It does mean that they did not talk about these experiences in their interviews in the same ways as others.

So what does all of this mean for doing life and ministry with youth in urban communities? Here are several key takeaways:

*Debriefing with those you know and trust is essential.* Research tells us that some people do not feel very comfortable sharing with others about deep experiences of disconnection or distress in their relationship with God because they don't know if others

believe that this type of expression is acceptable. Previous research reveals these differences can be correlated with racial and ethnic background.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one of the reasons that African Americans in our study did not talk about certain experiences during the interview is because they did not feel safe enough to do so. Highlighting the experience of emotional safety is incredibly important for ministry—especially in culturally diverse ministry settings. Intentionally creating space for honesty and openness in community is key. If students or staff feel they cannot be completely honest with at least one person in their support network, they won't be able to experience the beauty of having others "bear their burdens with them" (Gal 6:2).

*We must normalize questioning, doubting, and lamenting in the journey of faith.* Sometimes we mistakenly believe that real "faith" isn't messy, difficult, or at times overwhelming. But it is. Genuine faith is vulnerable and hard. All of the urban youth leaders in this study are men and women who were faithful to God in ministry, but who deeply struggled with fears and deep questions even in the midst of their journey. The Psalms are full of examples of open discussion of distress with God (e.g., Psalm 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 85, or 90). These passages contain honest questions and deep expressions of longing, frustration, fear, and even anger directed toward God. Sometimes students, staff members, or ministry volunteers are unaware that expressing these feelings is not only acceptable, but also healthy—especially after experiencing a crisis or trauma. We don't usually stay in these places of prolonged distress, but we do experience them.

*People process differently.* This may be an obvious statement to many, but sometimes we forget this simple truth. We also forget that people process differently due to individual differences (like personality), and other times due to cultural differences (such as ethnic or denominational/theological differences). These differences in processing are beautiful, and a normal part of most faith journeys. But sometimes people or organizations don't make these differences seem acceptable. Ministry leaders should seek feedback from staff and students about

what types of emotions or processes seem safe in their ministry community and what feels unsafe (e.g., expressing "sadness" but not "anger"). Once you've discovered what doesn't feel safe to share, brainstorm together about how you can work together to create a safe space.

*Ministry leaders model emotional expression.* The impact of modeling can't be overemphasized. Students and staff learn by watching and listening to what we say and do as well as what we don't say and do. This study highlights that even exemplary ministry leaders feel distant, discouraged, and angry with God at times. How they talk about their experience often depends on what they have learned is acceptable to discuss or express nonverbally (e.g., crying). Emotional and spiritual health go hand in hand. When people experience a very stressful life event and know that expressing lament in one's relationship with God and faith community is acceptable, they can remain open to faith rather than experience prolonged distance from their faith or their emotions (or both).


This research is a wonderful reminder that remaining faithful to Jesus and to his call to serve in urban environments can be incredibly painful. Jesus knew that faithfulness to the call would be painful and that safety in the midst of the difficulty is essential. In fact, Jesus prayed this prayer on our behalf: "I'm not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe from the evil one" (John 17:15). The community of faith is an essential part of the safety net that God has provided for us. My prayer as a Christ-follower and researcher is that we would learn to create safety for one another by acknowledging that ministry can be painful. Being honest about how that pain affects us and our relationships with God helps facilitate the process of hope and healing as we bear these burdens together.



#### ENDNOTE

1. J. J. Exline and J. B. Grubbs, "If I Tell Others about My Anger toward God, How Will They Respond? Predictors, Associated Behaviors and Outcomes in an Adult Sample," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 4 (November 2011): 304–15.





“As a police chaplain, I respond to critical incident calls as diverse as infant deaths, teen suicides, and traffic accidents. It is difficult to find the right words to say when you’re sitting in a room of young people grieving the loss of their friend to suicide. Words may fail us in the midst of tragedy. Often our most helpful response is to be present with others, sitting with them in their grief and being a safe place for them to express their feelings. This sacred ministry of God’s presence reminds us that we are not alone in the pain. Rituals help us to move between loss, memory, and healing. Together we can find a new normal and hope.”

✦ *Mary Glenn, an adjunct faculty member with the Fuller Youth Institute and School of Intercultural Studies, has been a pastor for over 20 years, a law enforcement chaplain and trainer, and an educator committed to leader and community development.*









## REVISITING OUR RESPONSE TO CHILDREN SUFFERING GLOBALLY

David H. Scott

David H. Scott, who serves as assistant professor of intercultural studies and children at risk, helped start Fuller's Children at Risk emphasis as a master's student in 2003 and has been teaching in the program ever since. His role as an international child advocate began in 1998 when his work with Viva Network first took him and his wife, Charity, to Oxford, England, and Cape Town, South Africa. Scott has recently contributed theological content to a Lausanne Occasional Paper on children at risk and is currently drafting a manuscript on mission with children to be published with Baker Books.

**M**y first experience with actor Sally Struthers was late on a Saturday night during my junior high school years. I had connived my parents into letting me finish watching a TV program well past my usual bedtime. The moment the credits rolled, the extended-format commercial started.

I was instantly transfixed. There she was, this white woman who was presented as a celebrity (I was too young to have watched her in the TV series *All in the Family*), sitting on the stoop of a hut somewhere in Africa. She was surrounded by black children—some arranged on her lap, others nearby with anxious and desperate looks in their eyes. My heart was broken for these poor African children, and I badly wanted to do something to help through the organization she was promoting. But knowing that I had no money of my own as a 13-year-old, I shut the TV off and went to bed, eager to escape Ms. Struthers's pleas.

Through today's ready accessibility of social media, all generations are confronted by the suffering of children well beyond the confines of late-late-night infomercials. In between all of the toddler videos, birthday wishes, and political rants dragging through my Facebook feed daily, I can count on at least one or two promotional advertisements for ministry organizations that feature children. And when a major crisis hits—an earthquake strikes, a war breaks out, an exposé gets released—the stories multiply. Even more, the problems of food insecurity that Ms. Struthers was trying to address seem to pale in comparison to the depths of abuse and exploitation of children that many of these headlines present. So the important question quickly becomes, What should a responsible Chris-

tian adult do with all of this graphic suffering of children, especially when it appears so frequently in the intimacy of our personal screens?

In the privileged West, we must be willing to allow difficult news to permeate the membranes of our personal and communal bubbles. Part of God's identity is father to the fatherless (Ps. 68:5), and as fellow children of God, we must recognize that even children who suffer far away are part of our extended family. We have a God-given responsibility to them, even if their needs are not as immediately evident to us as the children with whom we personally interact. So it's not really an option to simply ignore their pain as I did that night.

### COMPLICATED NEEDS DESERVE CAREFUL RESPONSES

Of course, as an American Christian, I would love to immediately board a plane and try to fix the problems myself. But as a teacher who has studied Christian mission with children at risk for the past couple of decades, I know that those kinds of solutions normally end up being more about satisfying the goer than effecting lasting change. Those children we see in snippets and images on our computers have real lives that take more than a quick fix. Lasting solutions require addressing complex and robust cultural systems that are structured to prioritize adult survival over the vulnerability of children in the midst of extreme hardships like ethnic violence and/or extreme poverty. Even if we think we've changed the situation for a single child, it is surprising how quickly a powerful social structure can snap back into place once a temporary foreign intervention ends. Instead, the kind of child-focused strategies I propose are slower, more critically reflective, and emphasize



strengthening local relational networks to sustain a child long term. They're the kind of solutions that my teenage middle-of-the-night self never could have fathomed, let alone imagined I would someday be advocating for.

So if hopping on a plane isn't the answer, we are left to sift through the cries for help and then rely on organizations that are already on the ground and have earned good reputations for addressing local needs in these distant places.

But how should we decide what causes are worth our consideration? This is most certainly a matter for prayer—real prayer. Not I'll-pray-about-it-if-I-remember-but-I-probably-won't prayer, but genuine, intentional prayer. In fact, interceding with God as a response to headlines is an incredible first step. As I pray, though, I find it valuable to remain sensitive to those causes that seem to raise the most distress in me. Often these are causes that connect with aspects of my own personal experience. When those connections happen, I know it's worth the effort to dig a little deeper.

#### **TAKING CHILDREN'S FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS SERIOUSLY**

At this point Christians often wonder which causes and organizations are worthy of support. Ultimately that question is much larger than the scope of this article, but my most strategic advice is to search for the ones that take a child's relationships seriously.

Thinking again about that early experience with Ms. Struthers, it's probably not by accident that the organization she was promoting chose to use an image of

their celebrity sponsor with children on her lap as the center of their fundraising strategy. It strongly evokes the Gospel narratives of Matthew 19:13–15 and Mark 10:13–16, in which children were being blessed by Jesus. But while there may be superficial similarities between these texts and that infomercial, the contrast between the two pictures is profound. Among many other differences, the biblical accounts describe the children as being brought by their parents. In contrast, the Struthers commercial did not leave any room for adults other than herself. This is telling, since sociologists who study imagery around children (there is a surprising amount of literature on this) suggest that when adults are absent in images of suffering children, the unstated implication of that image is that their parents are somehow inattentive or absent. As a result, these images invite viewing adults to see themselves as momentary surrogate parents, and to exercise maternal protectiveness as a way of creating connections between the ideas of children they evoke and the would-be donor. But the presence of parents in the Gospel accounts reminds us that Jesus was working within existing family structures. He was not inserting himself as a surrogate parent for these children (although the idea of how Jesus would have served as a father is a provocative one). Rather, he received the children from their parents, blessed them, and then returned them.

Understanding this example of Jesus is key to understanding effective work, because good work with children sees changing children's family structures only as a last resort. The most effective

efforts first try to understand the existing relational worlds of the children they serve, and then take steps to strengthen those relationships. These kinds of approaches have the advantage of building on the resources a child already has, and minimize the amount of upheaval they might otherwise experience through more radical interventions. So rather than rounding up orphaned children and sending them to a group home several villages away, an important measure of the effectiveness of an organization's work can come from finding out how much work is done to support parents so that families can stay intact, or to explore extended family networks to find alternative care options if parents are no longer around or capable of offering nurturing care.

Finding out this kind of information about the actual strategies employed by an aid organization takes more effort than scrolling through a news feed. But depending on the transparency of an organization's website, it can be easier to identify these kinds of ministry priorities than you might expect. Even better, the most reliable way to identify worthy ministries is to work through your own relational networks. Who do you know who might know something about the problem that you are learning about? Perhaps they know someone who knows someone who is addressing the concern in viable and thoughtful ways. Working through your networks can take time, but the benefit is that you are immediately solving one of the inherent problems of much of our giving today: you can never ultimately be sure what has taken place, and how your contribution has been used.

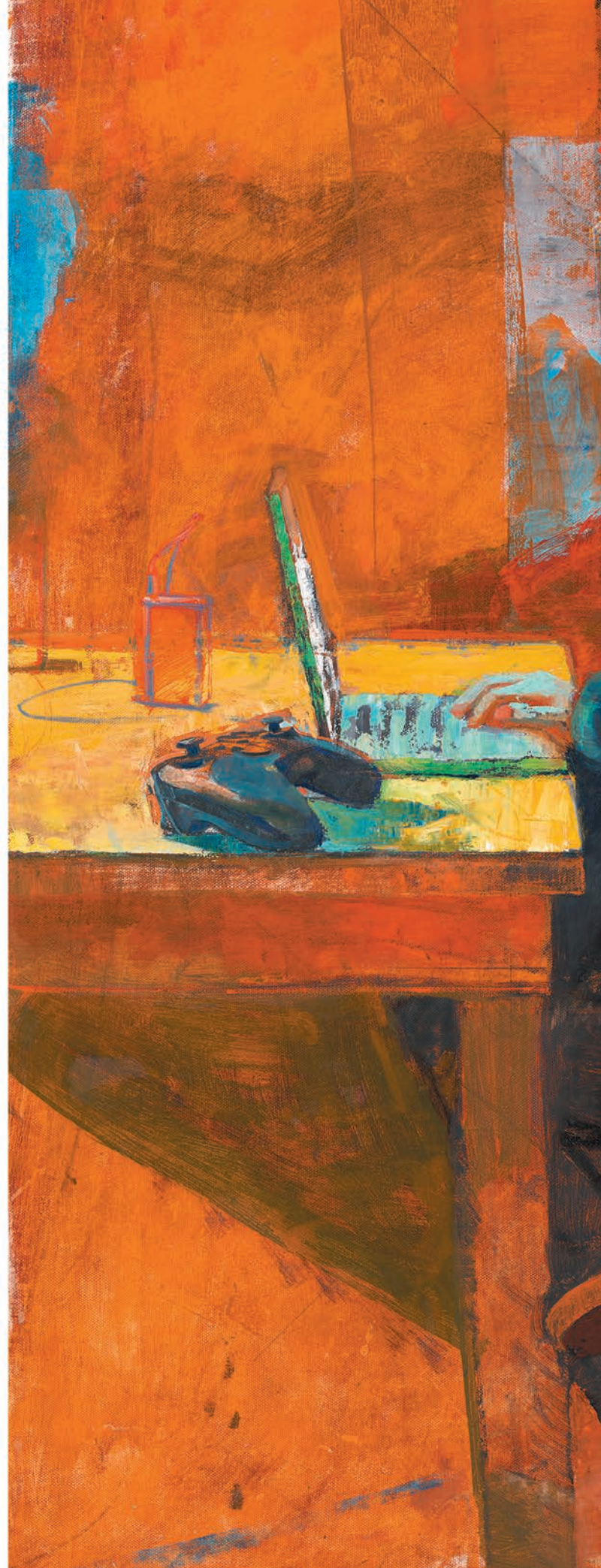
If you find your relational connections don't extend far enough to help you make informed decisions, perhaps the best strategy is to be guided by what you can learn from Internet research, followed by seeking to establish deeper relationships with an organization as part of your support over time. This will likely take special effort since many donation opportunities are designed to be essentially anonymous—allowing givers to contribute funds without the hassle of having a real relationship. These no-fuss arrangements are solely monetary because this is what Western Christians tend to want. However, I'm advocating for something a little messier. Even if you're not a major donor (or a financial donor at all), many organizations will welcome the occasional phone call or email check-in from a concerned partner who wants to know more.

Some community-focused child sponsorship organizations show that they know this well. A few even facilitate donor visits with sponsored children so that a supporter can make a more personal connection with a child and their family. But even if these special kinds of opportunities are unavailable, I always urge donors to find ways of making meaningful connections with the people who are doing direct work with children. The most well-known Christian child development agencies have legitimately earned their sterling reputations through decades of achieving effective results with children within the contexts of their families and communities, and child sponsorship is just one part of what they do. So you are wise to do your own research and establish enough of a connection to feel well informed about what is actually happening in face-to-face work with children.

#### FROM REACTIONS TO RELATIONSHIPS

The next time you encounter a troubling account of a young person's extraordinary needs, I hope you will take these recommendations to heart. First, pray, asking God to guide what you should do next, remaining sensitive to those needs that you find the most distressing. Second, do your best research and relational networking to find the groups that are focused on respecting and enhancing the relationships that already exist in a child's life, rather than applying artificial solutions that may not last or might even hurt a child in the long run. Third, ask questions and work to develop or enhance your relationships with those groups you find to be doing the most promising work. In the process, you just might discover a new dimension of your relationship with the Father of the fatherless.

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## YOUTH AS CATALYSTS

The story of God's work within a group called the "Warder" illustrates that children are not just objects of, but also instigators of, the *missio Dei*. A few decades ago, the Warder settled on the outskirts of Nagpur, India. The adults often travel around, bartering coffee mugs, steel jugs, and the like in exchange for women's hair, which is sold for export to make wigs. Little thought is given to the future—just today's needs or pleasure. Children don't attend school. Parents leave them at home unattended for days at a time, to care for siblings and do housework. Children often buy alcohol and tobacco for their parents and then are rewarded with a portion of what they buy. Before they reach adolescence, most are addicted to drugs.

In 2012, the Indian Evangelical Team started a children's club among the Warder. It was the rowdiest club ever! Slowly, though, lives were transformed. Children learned reading, writing, morals, and hygiene, and grew spiritually. Their changed lives attracted their parents—and now, some 40 families have accepted Christ and joined the church. Many have started new businesses and are now present at home, caring for their children. From this transformation, two more children's clubs have developed in nearby towns. When it comes to God's work near Nagpur, the children are the catalysts.

+ Joy Clement Daniel, national director for children and youth for the Indian Evangelical Team, is currently pursuing a PhD in the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller with a focus on children at risk.





## NAMING, NAVIGATING, AND REFRAMING DEPRESSION IN THE LIVES OF TEENAGERS

Rhett Smith

Rhett Smith (MSMFT '07) is a practicing marriage and family therapist and the author of *The Anxious Christian: Can God Use Your Anxiety for Good?* and *What It Means to Be a Man: God's Design for Us in a World Full of Extremes*. He lives with his family in McKinney, Texas, and he blogs at [rhettsmith.com](http://rhettsmith.com).

**“S**ometimes I feel like we are just running a hotel and restaurant around here!”

I still remember my dad making that exasperated statement when I was 17 years old. I was moody and irritable, and made little effort to engage my dad or stepmom in any meaningful way. Twenty-four years later, I continue to think about that comment—not because I think my dad was a bad parent (quite the opposite, and he probably doesn't even remember that exchange), but because I think this scenario is indicative of the challenges that parents and others face when it comes to properly discerning and diagnosing depression in adolescents.

Was I depressed? Possibly.

I had lost my mom to a five-year battle with breast cancer when I was 11 years old, creating an immediate stuttering issue in school. This only fueled my anxiety in social settings and left me isolated. As a teenager I was also in the midst of significant life transitions surrounding school, identity, relationships, and faith formation. And that's not to mention all the changes in brain development.<sup>1</sup>

So what was going on with me?

Depression?

Typical teenage behavioral development?

Life transitions?

Probably a mixture of all of the above, which is why seeing and responding to depression in young people can be complicated.

My story is similar to the stories that I hear

frequently in my therapy practice related to depression and adolescents. The underlying instinctual fear in parents seems to become, “Am I going to miss something crucial in my child's mental health that could lead to serious consequences?”

This is a good instinct, because like many issues related to mental health, two important factors frequently obscure the true nature of what is going on. First, depression itself can be somewhat tricky to diagnose, not to mention determining what type of depression is at hand. Second, there are cultural contexts in which talk of depression (like that of anxiety) brings about shame and guilt, often driving those suffering underground in order to avoid any stigma.

As a Christian and former pastor, I have encountered many adolescents who are fearful of this very stigma when it comes to talking about depression, especially if they are part of a faith community in which depression is frowned upon. As a Christian, I take comfort in knowing the biblical text presents people in the midst of all kinds of life struggles, and many prominent biblical characters struggle with what could be characterized as depression. I love the words of the psalmist David when he laments in Psalm 38:7-8, “I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning . . . I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.” Not only me, but also many of my adolescent clients can take comfort in biblical texts like these. Through these stories, they realize that their own experiences of depression are part of the human condition.

### DISCERNING DEPRESSION

Most parents are privy to occasions when their teenagers mope around the house,



spending inordinate amounts of time alone in their room playing video games or texting, seeming emotionally short-fused in verbal tone and responses, and generally refusing to engage in family activities. These are some of the behaviors mentioned by family members and other caring adults when they begin to wonder if a young person is experiencing depression.

The problem, of course, is that most of us can recall times in our adolescent years when we mimicked similar behaviors, and we may not have been depressed. So how do we understand depression at work in the lives of teenagers? The Anxiety and Depression Association of America writes:

*Depression is a condition in which a person feels discouraged, sad, hopeless, unmotivated, or disinterested in life in general. When these feelings last for a short period of time, it may be a case of “the blues.”*

*But when such feelings last for more than two weeks and when the feelings interfere with daily activities such as taking care of family, spending time with friends, or going to work or school, it’s likely a major depressive episode.<sup>2</sup>*

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reports that “about 11 percent of adolescents have a depressive disorder by age 18.”<sup>3</sup> In the past it was thought that young people couldn’t suffer from actual clinical depression, but today we know this is not the case. The NIMH further states the following:

*We now know that youth who have depression may show signs that are slightly different from the typical adult*

*symptoms of depression. Children who are depressed may complain of feeling sick, refuse to go to school, cling to a parent or caregiver, or worry excessively that a parent may die. Older children and teens may sulk, get into trouble at school, be negative or grouchy, or feel misunderstood.<sup>4</sup>*

If more intense and lasting signs of sadness, hopelessness, anger, or frustration continue more than a couple of weeks, these are signs that more help may be needed.

So when you wonder about depression and teenagers, you may find it helpful to ask a few questions:

1. Do the behaviors I witness deviate from the typical and “normal” behaviors of this teenager?
2. Has there been some recent event that might be related to this change in behavior and mood in this teenager?
3. Is it possible that something I always thought was part of their personality actually could be a form of long-term depression?

These questions often help me, as a therapist, formulate some type of possible diagnosis so that I can know what steps to take. But sometimes it is hard to know what to do next. *If you find yourself unsure of what the next steps are for your child, I recommend that you seek professional help.*

#### WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

Depression, like talk of suicide, is one of those mental health issues that many people find overwhelming. It’s easy to feel helpless. However, I believe all of us can utilize a specific set of skills to help the teenagers around us suffering from depression.





## **THE ONLY SIX WORDS PARENTS NEED TO SAY TO THEIR KIDS ABOUT PERFORMANCE**

I tend to be a disgruntled sports parent.

I get concerned about the ways our culture obsesses about young people's performance. It only takes a walk to a local park to witness the myriad of parental anxiety and dysfunction that plays out on the sidelines. Sports have such potential to build character, perseverance, and skill. Sometimes they succeed, and other times coaches, parents, and mobs of hot-or-cold fans burn out or puff up kids and teenagers in quite damaging ways.

While trying to figure out how to be a different kind of sports parent myself, I stumbled across work by student leadership development expert Tim Elmore.<sup>1</sup> In it he discusses research on what parents can say both before and after the game to encourage their kids, without centering everything on performance (either positively or negatively). Based on psychologists' recommendations, Elmore suggests the following as the healthiest statements parents can make as kids perform—and not only in sports, but in *any* kind of performance-oriented activity:

### **BEFORE THE EVENT:**

*Have fun.*  
*Play hard.*  
*I love you.*

### **AFTER THE EVENT:**

*Did you have fun?*  
*I'm proud of you.*  
*I love you.*

+ Brad Griffin (MDiv '07) is associate director of the Fuller Youth Institute.

### **ENDNOTE**

1. Tim Elmore, "What Parents Should Say as Their Kids Perform," August 16, 2013, <http://growingleaders.com/blog/what-parents-should-say-as-their-kids-perform/>.

### *1. Do not judge.*

One of the worst things we can do to a young person who is suffering with depression is to judge him or her. When someone is depressed, he or she is already wrestling with feelings of worthlessness and shame, and further judgment only perpetuates this shame cycle and drives the person further into hiding. Often people look at those with depression and think, "If they would just do this . . . or that," but what we fail to realize is that depression can have a destructive effect on basic actions like eating, sleeping, exercising, and prayer.

Instead, work toward approaching those with depression with empathy and compassion. Ask yourself the question, "What do I need to do to get in their shoes and see things from their perspective?" Understanding diffuses judgment and makes it safe for the person with depression to come out of isolation and hopefully reengage others in a way that is life-giving.

Unfortunately, one of the more unsafe places for teenagers to talk about their depression has been in the Christian community, which has historically been laced with a host of unfortunate stigmas related to mental health. We still have a long way to go.<sup>5</sup>

### *2. Explore all options.*

Depression is multifaceted and needs a very robust approach. If you know a teenager struggling with depression, I recommend you keep your options open and explore all kinds of possible treatment. Pastoral caregiving, professional counseling, and psychiatric medication could all be helpful at different times, as well as an exploration of various aspects of self-care and the young person's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual life.



Begin by engaging the teenager in a non-judgmental way to best determine what they may need. In my experience, some teenagers navigate through depression in a healthy way because there is someone present in their life who cares about them. Sometimes a teenager may need the safe space of counseling for a few months to work through depression, and other times ongoing social support may do the trick. The point is that no one size fits all, and it's helpful to experiment with different approaches and see what works.

### 3. *Be present.*

One of the most powerful transforming agents in the life of someone who is struggling with depression is the healing presence of another: a presence that is non-judging, compassionate and empathetic, and willing to be with the person suffering from depression. Too often we find ourselves wanting to try to do something to fix the person who is depressed, when one of the best responses we can offer is our ability to sit with them. One of the reasons people struggle to be with someone they know who suffers from depression is because it bumps up against their own feelings of inadequacy and inability to find a quick fix.

### AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

I know few teenagers who escape adolescence without a brush with some form of depression. The teenage years are full of difficult transitions, broken relationships, peer pressure, and struggles at home, school, and work, all of which make this time of life a ripe environment for depression to take root.

Ultimately, I believe one of the best responses we can offer a teenager who is struggling with depression is the opportunity to help them see their pain and suffering as a catalyst for growth in their lives. But it is a journey they can't enter into on their own. Author and educator Parker Palmer has been helpful to me in his description of learning to reframe his ongoing struggle with depression as an act of grace. Parker writes this about the theological reframing his therapist offered him in the midst of depression:

*After hours of careful listening, my therapist offered an image that helped me eventually reclaim my life. "You seem to look upon depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you," he said. "Do you think you could see it instead as the hand of a friend, pressing you down to the ground on which it is safe to stand?"*

*Amid the assaults I was suffering, the suggestion that depression was my friend seemed impossibly romantic, even insulting. But something in me knew that down, down to the ground, was the direction of wholeness, thus allowing that image to begin its slow work of healing me.*

*I started to understand that I had been living an ungrounded life, living at an altitude that was inherently unsafe. The problem with living at high altitude is simple: when we slip, as we always do, we have a long, long way to fall, and the landing may well kill us. The grace of being pressed down to the ground is also simple: when we slip and fall, it is usually not fatal, and we can get back up.<sup>6</sup>*

You may be that trusted guide a young person needs—and wants—to help them take the next step.



### RESOURCES FOR THE NEXT STEP

#### Websites:

To Write Love on Her Arms ([twloha.com](http://twloha.com)): Though a resource for anyone, this site is particularly helpful for parents to steer their adolescents toward because it has done a phenomenal job of spreading the message through music, art, youth culture, and social media.

How to Handle Teen Depression by youth expert Josh Shipp ([joshshipp.com/teen-depression-facts](http://joshshipp.com/teen-depression-facts)).

#### Books:

Sheri Van Dijk, *Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills for Helping You Manage Mood Swings, Control Angry Outbursts, and Get Along with Others* (Instant Help, 2011). This book offers greater depth, plus some helpful tools and skills for both parents and adolescents.

Deborah Serani, *Depression and Your Child: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

### ENDNOTES

1. For a helpful reference on teen brain development and its implications for everyday behavior, see Dan Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2014).
2. "Understand the Facts: Depression," Anxiety and Depression Association of America, <http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/depression>.
3. "Depression in Children and Adolescents," National Institute of Mental Health, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-in-children-and-adolescents/index.shtml>.
4. Ibid.
5. See Rhett Smith, "Christian and Depressed," *Relevant Magazine*, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/whole-life/christian—and-depressed>.
6. Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1999), 66.





## AN INVITATION TO THRIVE: HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE FIND THEIR COORDINATES

Pamela Ebstyne King

Pamela Ebstyne King is the Peter L. Benson Associate Professor of Applied Developmental Science at Fuller's School of Psychology. Devoted to understanding what enables youth to thrive and become all God created them to be, she co-authored *The Reciprocating Self: A Theological Perspective of Development*, coedited *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, and has been published in numerous academic journals. She completed her MDiv and PhD at Fuller, undergraduate studies at Stanford University, and a postdoctoral fellowship at Stanford's Center on Adolescence. She is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

People in the academy often ask me, why religion? Why is religion so helpful for kids to thrive? Among the several things I might say, I point to the transformative power of *transcendence*: an encounter that is so meaningful and profound that it propels change in how kids understand themselves and their place in the world.

Second, I suggest that religion not only offers an encounter with the divine, but also provides an embodied belief system—a real community of people offering defined ideals, values, beliefs, and actual examples of how to live them out. In this way, religion provides a community of coordinates.

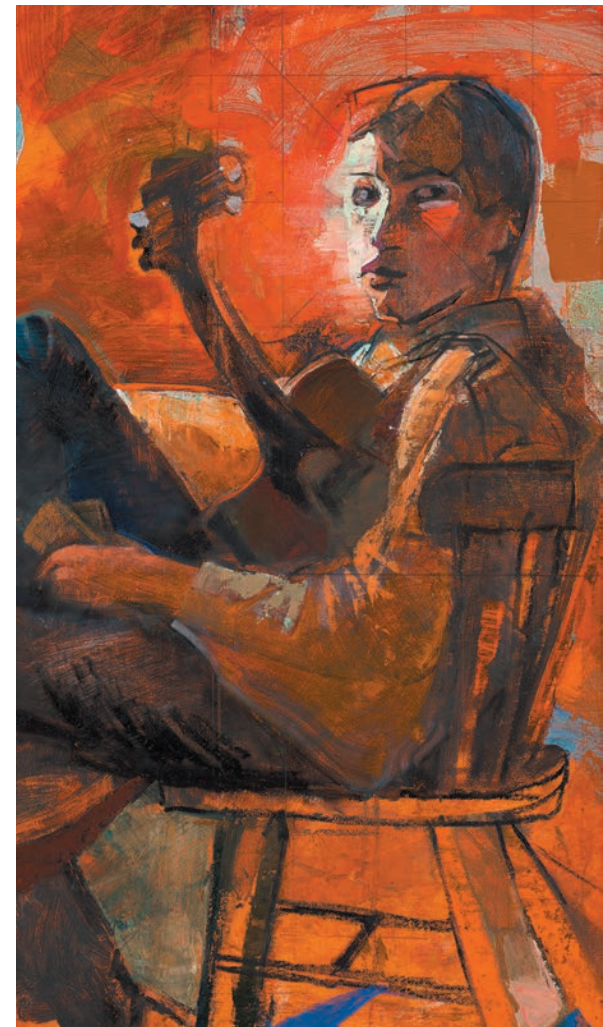
Coordinates are necessary to locate oneself in the world. Young people are not ultimately intelligible apart from the family and community within which they exist. Furthermore, people are not intelligible without reference to the transcendent horizon within which they exist and to which their deepest longings point.<sup>1</sup>

I used to love to play Battleship with my brothers, and now I play it with my kids. Do you remember how to find a boat? C4 . . . B6 . . . A9 . . . The boats are located by coordinates. Similarly, youth need coordinates to locate themselves, to form an identity. They need reference points to know their course. Navigating the waters of adolescence is no easy task. There are abundant opportunities, but there are also turbulent and deep waters.

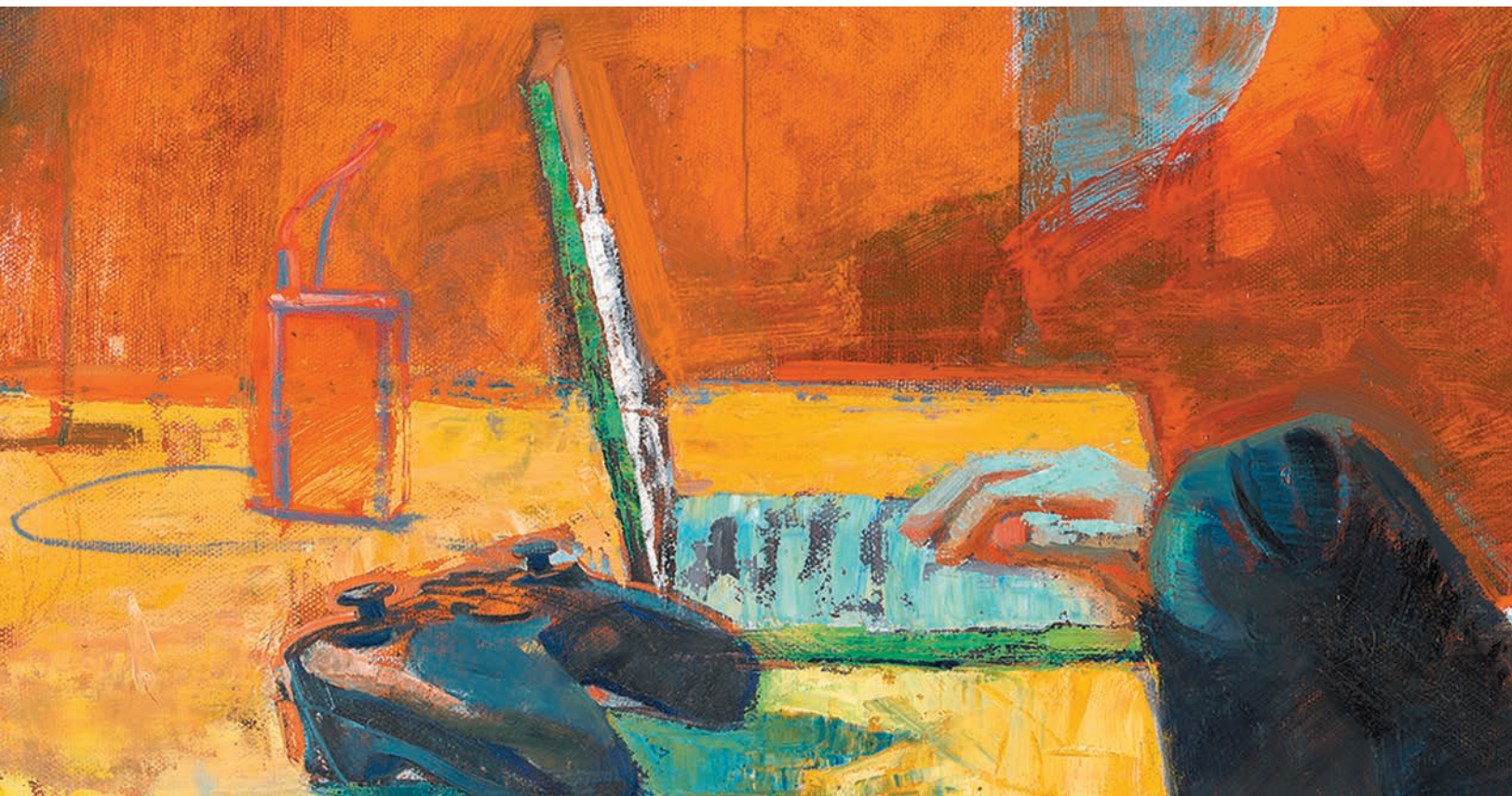
As youth today work out their lives—their sense of self, their identity, their purpose, their “sparks”—they have so many options through which to discover and explore all of this.

They have so many outlets, it's dizzying. A multitude of allegiances compete for their attention and time. These are not just activities, but so many options to follow—Facebook, Instagram, other social media. Kids are invited to follow . . . to like . . . to belong. It's hard to know who you are and to whom you belong when you are following so much. These are all different stories that youth are literally following. How does anyone make sense out of that?

Religion provides an alternative: a grand story to follow and to which to belong. It gives a set of coordinates in which young







people can find themselves. When youth know what story they are part of, they can begin to find and understand their role in that story: whether it is the gospel narrative of being a follower of Jesus, aligning oneself with the Jewish notion of *tikkun olam*—of being a part of God’s covenant people in the repair of the world—or understanding oneself as a contributing citizen of a democracy.

When you know the story to which you belong, and when you know your role in that story, you have a profound sense of purpose. That is what we are invited into: the ultimate story of God’s ongoing work in

this world. When we find ourselves contributing to a greater story, we thrive.

If we understand thriving in this light, then we understand the invitation is not simply to accept what God has done through the cross, but also to accept and embrace our part in God’s ongoing and unfolding story of faithfulness. Our invitation to thrive is then understood as an invitation to a new order: one set forth and defined by the pattern—the *logos*—of Christ. We understand that when Jesus says “Follow me,” he’s not referring to Instagram or Facebook; he is referring to a way of life and participation in his ongoing ministry here on earth. We

remember that when he left this earth as a physical man, he gave us his Spirit to empower us and to continue his work on this planet.

Now that’s a set of coordinates.

+ This article was excerpted from Dr. King’s address at her installation as the Peter L. Benson Associate Professor of Applied Developmental Science on May 5, 2016. More at [thethrivecenter.org](http://thethrivecenter.org).



#### ENDNOTE

1. David Benner, *Human Being and Becoming: Living the Adventure of Life and Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).





## NAVIGATING A DIGITAL MEDIA WORLD WITH TEENAGERS

Art Bamford

Art Bamford is a research fellow at the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture at University of Colorado-Boulder, where he is currently pursuing a PhD in Media Studies. He holds an MDiv from Fuller and an MA in Media and Communication from the University of Denver, where he served as a research associate for the Estlow Center's *Teens & New Media @ Home* project. Bamford has been a member of the Fuller Youth Institute team since 2013 and coauthored, with Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, the 2015 book *Right Click: Parenting Your Teenager in a Digital Media World*.

### *Put that thing down!*

This was Betsy's first response when I asked a group of moms, "What comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'social media'?" The room burst out in laughter.

I was listening to parents talk about these concerns as part of a project with the Fuller Youth Institute, because the amount of time young people spend using digital devices seems to be one of the most pressing challenges for parents today. It feels like young people are tethered to their phones, constantly glancing or full-on staring into a screen. But before we judge kids or insist they "put that thing down," we need to understand what today's digital world is like, and what motivates young people to check their devices so frequently.

### WELCOME TO A WHOLE NEW WORLD

There is no question that digital media use has exploded among teenagers. According to recent US research findings:<sup>1</sup>

- Ninety-two percent of teenagers report going online at least once per day. Twenty-four percent of teens admit to going online "almost constantly."
- Seventy-one percent of teenagers use more than one social media platform to keep in touch with friends.
- Sixty-eight percent of 13- to 14-year-olds and 76 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds have smartphones.

If we could peel back the surface-level reality of these statistics, we also might see a fundamental difference in how young people experience digital media compared with their parents and older generations. Researchers have referred to today's adults as "digital immigrants," whereas young

people are "digital natives."<sup>2</sup> Like most immigrants, we bring luggage from our pre-digital world, namely some of the expectations we have about why and how people use media. My grandfather moved to the United States from England when he was just four years old, yet he continued to have a hint of an accent from his native country (and a cup of tea every afternoon) until the day he died. In a similar way, we may use digital technology ourselves and feel like it is now "home" in some ways. But in reality we will never be as fully steeped in digital culture as the generation after us.<sup>3</sup>

Digital media was created and designed to facilitate better, faster collaboration and interaction. When we talked about media in the past, we presupposed a fairly passive type of engagement in which a "mass" audience of people would simply receive words, images, and sounds. But now it's a whole new world, and a social world at that. This is extremely important to keep in mind when it comes to navigating this world with young people: they don't experience digital media as being *more* interactive, as we do. To them, media *means* interacting.

### FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS WITH DIGITAL NATIVES

Like it or not, we can't remove *digital* like a stain from young people and get them to think about media and use it the way we do. That's not the world they live in now, and it's not the one they're going to live in as adults. The digital layer of reality impacts our thinking, relationships, and spirituality.

Parents want to talk about media more with their kids, and many are trying admirably to do so, but aren't always sure how. It turns out that we are living in a transitional phase in history. This means parents can—and should—have totally new conversations



with kids. The biggest stumbling block for adults tends to be not what we *do*, but how we *think* about media. When we fail to understand how young people think about it, our conversations about boundaries, rules, and good decisions get lost in translation. The goal is to have great relationships with our kids. Media will be in the middle of that somehow. Rather than a divider, we want it to be a middle ground—a *common ground* where families connect.

#### TAKE A TRIP TO THE LUNCHROOM

So why do young people constantly check their phones and other devices? We are often inclined to focus on how young people use media, but it can be helpful for us to turn this equation around and ask: “What perceived needs or desires does this kind of use gratify?”<sup>4</sup> By asking this “why?” question to identify underlying motivations, we are better able to both understand young people’s media use as well as find outlets that meet these same needs through non-tech or low-tech activities.

For example, when many of us were teenagers, we fulfilled our social needs to connect with other young people by talking on the phone (probably one with a curly cord that was mounted to a wall). This same social motivation is driving teenagers to connect today, but different technologies facilitate that hunger.

We’ve found it helpful to think about teenagers’ use of digital media as today’s version of the school lunchroom.

Teenagers have always seemed hyper-social to adults because they are in a stage of life when they begin to form

their own identities. The question “Who am I?” plays on a continuous loop, like background music in our subconscious, throughout adolescence. Coming up with a sufficient answer to this question is a complicated and difficult job, and we work on it largely through relationships.

School cafeterias have always been a kind of petri dish within which young people experiment with this “work” of identity formation. To parents and educators, the noon break is about eating lunch. But for teens it can be the defining moment of the entire day. It provides a space in which they can be themselves, but as people still learning who those selves are, it becomes a social laboratory. Every lunch is a kid’s opportunity to experiment, observe, tweak the formula a bit, and get ready to test out the new version tomorrow. The cafeteria experiment is filled not only with conversation, but also tons of nonverbal communication—students’ seating locations, their clothing styles, what and how they eat, and how they interact with each other.

In much the same way, being an active participant in social media is not limited to verbal interaction or one-on-one conversations.<sup>5</sup> Parents often underappreciate how a quick scroll through social media for a teen can be like scanning the lunchroom. Young people have very sophisticated ways of conveying social cues with digital media that we as adults struggle to recognize or grasp.

Many of these cues are nonverbal because young people lack the capacity to express what they’re thinking and feeling in words, and crave more relatively unsupervised space to interact

with their peers. These nonverbal messages also allow them to efficiently send the equivalent of a thousand words with one image. That’s why phenomena like emoji and photo sharing catch on like wildfire (and continually evolve). This is also why monitoring the “economy” of likes, shares, votes, and views is so incredibly important for young people. And the irony of the lunchroom analogy is that often today’s teenagers are also using digital social media in their actual school lunchrooms, navigating all these layers all at once.

#### RITUALS AND RHYTHMS

We who are digital immigrants still have some sense of what researchers have called “media rituals.”<sup>6</sup> We remember when we could only access and use certain media in designated times and places: a radio in the car or bedroom every morning, the evening news on TV in the family room, and a Friday night at the movies.

What many parents call “screen time” today is an attempt to establish that same kind of consistency and sense of routine with digital media. But once your child comes to own or access devices regularly, this is *extremely* difficult. We could limit screen time when it was just TV, a game system, or even a video on an iPad, but once kids start texting and doing homework on a computer, screen time becomes more diffuse and omnipresent.

Digital media doesn’t just lack a kind of ritualistic stability; it often seems to go a step further and interrupt our other daily rhythms and feeling of togetherness as families. So families need to reimagine what family time looks like, and come to



terms with the surprising ways that technology both helps our bonding as well as hinders it.

Families can begin by carving out specific times and spaces that are heavy-tech and low-tech. One mom we spoke with told us that something as simple as buying a new table had helped alleviate some of her media-related stress with her son. “We got this table that’s in the family room for our youngest, and all his devices have to be on the table. That’s where he has to use them.” This simple change turned a lot of frustrated “no’s” into clear expectations. As digital media continues to evolve, the most important thing to focus on is consistent consensus about what our family’s expectations are with regard to when, where, and how we use and interact through our various devices.

#### **YOU’VE GOT A FRIEND IN MEDIA**

Researchers have found that when asked about their happiest memories involving family, a lot of kids describe times shared that somehow involved media. This is especially true of new media, when young people got to be the family’s resident expert and explain something to their parents for a change. Creative parents are diving into kids’ technology as a way of entering their world, whether that means playing video games, getting better at text slang, or sharing funny memes. We will probably embarrass ourselves in the process, but it is meaningful and endearing when we try. And it helps build the rela-





tionships that we are hoping for in the first place, using technology as a tool that binds rather than divides.

If we're being totally honest, one of our biggest worries as adults is that the young people we love will end up using digital media a lot like we do, in some of the ways that bother us. They'll feel perpetually interrupted, struggle to be present and attentive, wish they made more time to enjoy things like a good book or coffee with a friend without constantly checking their phones, or feel unsatisfied with their lives compared to what they see in their social media feeds.

This is where young people can help us make this journey a two-way street. They have a lot to teach us if we are willing to listen, watch, and meet them in the world in which they are natural-born residents. Our investment in walking alongside them as they learn to use digital media can pay dividends by helping us relearn, or even unlearn, how we have grown accustomed to using it ourselves. Together we can forge a hopeful path on which digital

media is neither a savior nor an enemy, but a companion.

**F**

#### ENDNOTES

1. Statistics compiled from Pew Research Center, "Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015" (April 9, 2015), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>; and Pew Research Center, "Teens, Technology and Friendships" (August 6, 2015), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/teens-technology-and-friendships>.
2. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2010).
3. When we say "digital media," we're talking about a puzzle of computers, microchips, software, video games, and the Internet that coalesced together as one big phenomenon in the early 2000s. The two key distinctions that separate digital from older "analog" media, such as television, radio, and print, are the ways in which digital devices are *interactive* and *interconnected*. Walter Isaacson traces the evolution of each of these separate inventions and how they were integrated into a singular digital media in his book *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).
4. Richard Jackson Harris and Fred W. Sanborn, *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 31–34.
5. Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 59–71.
6. Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Also Paul Jones and David Holmes, *Key Concepts in Media and Communications* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 193–97.





## WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW— AND DO—ABOUT TEENAGE SEXUALITY

Clifford and Joyce Penner

Joyce Penner, a registered nurse and clinical nurse specialist, holds a BS in nursing from the University of Washington and a master's degree in psychosomatic nursing and nursing education from UCLA. Clifford Penner, a licensed clinical psychologist who is chair of Fuller's Board of Trustees, earned a BA from Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, an MA in Theology from Fuller, and a PhD from Fuller's Graduate School of Psychology. Together, the Penners are best known for their pioneering work in encouraging people of all faiths to connect their sexuality with their belief system—helping them embrace sex as good and of God, opening the topic of sexuality within churches of many denominations.

**T**he sex talk.

Many parents dread it.

The typical teenager dreads it even more.

And we think that's a tragedy.

After all, God created us—all of us—as sexual beings. While our sexual identity transcends every life stage, adolescence is a time of particularly high sexual energy. As our children move away from their parents toward their peers, they will make choices—choices with consequences. We hope that they will fulfill their God-given potential. We pray that they will make choices that align with God's teachings and will lead to healthy friendships, good mate selection, and a lasting marriage.

Hence the need for the sex talk.

### THE GOOD AND BAD NEWS ABOUT THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN THEIR KIDS' SEXUAL CHOICES

Here's the good news: *Parents and influential adults can make a difference.* Multiple studies highlight that one of the best predictors of sexual conservativeness in young people is closeness to one parent. Specifically, "Teens who report being able to talk to a parent and who feel close to that parent appear to have a solid foundation in that relationship that allows them to make better decisions and better resist peer pressure toward sexual activity."<sup>1</sup>

Now for the bad news. Other research suggests that the more important religion (including Christianity) is to parents, the more difficult it is for those same parents to talk with their kids about sex.<sup>2</sup> Maybe it's because parents may have made sexual

mistakes that they don't want their children to repeat and suffer the same consequences. Parents feel guilty and unqualified to journey with kids on a path that they never walked.

Perhaps talking about sex feels so awkward that parents would just rather remain silent.

Yet the reality is that whether or not our kids are eager to receive our input, and even if we are nervous about our kids' sexuality, we must use our role as parents or influential adults to guide them. If we do not teach them, they will learn primarily on the streets, from their friends, on their electronic devices, or from movies and television.

### WHAT TYPES OF CHOICES ARE TEENAGERS MAKING TODAY?

The typical teenager is probably engaging in sexual intercourse and oral sex earlier than their parents did.

- The average age that people have sex for the first time in the United States is 18.<sup>3</sup>
- Though US teen pregnancy and abortion rates are decreasing, there are still approximately 52 pregnancies per 1,000 15- to 19-year-old women and 14 abortions per 1,000 15- to 19-year-old women.<sup>4</sup>
- Increasing sexual activity for adolescents is not just a moral threat; it is a threat to their emotional development and can even be a threat to their lives. Sexually transmitted diseases (or STDs), many of which are not easily detectable, are at epidemic levels.



Does religion make a difference in teenagers' sexual choices? While not every study that examines this question agrees, there's ample evidence suggesting that personal religious devotion is a strong protective influence against sexual activity. In particular, one study revealed that young people with firm personal religious convictions are less likely to engage in sexual activity than their peers.<sup>5</sup>

#### WHAT DO WE HOPE KIDS LEARN BY AGE 13?

Your own kids may still be too young to face the types of sexual choices depicted above, but it's likely not too early to start talking to your kids about sex. Based on our research, we hope by age 13 all young people will have learned five principles about sex:

1. *Sex is good and from God.* It is important that children from toddlerhood through adolescence learn that the feelings in their bodies are wonderful and designed by God to feel good.
2. *Sexual curiosity is natural.* Children of all ages will be sexually curious; when we affirm their curiosity and give them tools for understanding sexuality, their curiosity will more likely be directed to healthy, informed actions.
3. *Sexual feelings and responses are automatic.* Involuntary sexual body responses begin at birth and continue throughout adult life; teaching children about the normality of these responses and the feelings connected with these responses empowers them.
4. *Sexual responsibility belongs to each person.* Sexual actions are in our control; the responses happen to us,

but we can make decisions about and choose what we do with those feelings.

5. *Biblical standards and mutual respect are the guidelines for all sexual decisions.* As we look at Scripture, it becomes clear that God's intention for us is to have a mutual, fulfilling, and delightful sexual relationship in marriage. In calling adolescents to wait for marriage, it is important to share the potential future benefits of waiting, not just the negative possibilities resulting from choosing not to wait.

If this list gives you a pit in your stomach because your child is older than 13 and you are not sure they have internalized these five principles, fear not. You still have time to influence your child's sexual attitudes, values, and choices.

#### WHAT CAN PARENTS TALK ABOUT AND MODEL WITH THEIR TEENAGE CHILDREN?

On the one hand, our culture presents teenagers a casual view of sex as primarily physical—that it's perfectly normal to "hook up" and have a "friend with benefits." On the other hand, the church's message of "Don't do it!" tends to cause adolescents to either block their sexual feelings or experience guilt when they respond to those feelings.

As parents and influential adults, we can help adolescents both affirm and learn to manage their sexuality by teaching them that their sexual feelings, desires, and responses are good and of God. As people created in the image of God, adolescents can take charge of their sexual actions. Effective conversations in the home help young people appreciate and embrace their sexual intensity, while not living in



bondage to it. Most adolescents today know the biological facts and may have been taught the dangers of having sex too early, but few will have been taught how to appreciate sexual feelings and manage their sexual drives. To be effective, we must be at ease with our own sexuality, conversant with sexual terminology, and comfortable discussing all aspects of sexuality and sexual activity.

We need to help teens think through the *potential consequences* of engaging in sex as an adolescent: the lifelong consequences of adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; the emotional turmoil of losing themselves with another person when they are in the stage of finding themselves; the relational ramifications of distrust and establishing unhealthy sexual patterns; and the impact on a young person's relationship with God when they experience sex outside of marriage.

Sexual patterns, easily conditioned in our early sexual experiences, are *tenaciously self-perpetuating*. Adolescents establish a pattern of disconnecting when they have casual, impersonal, recreational sex without affection, emotion, or attachment. They establish a pattern of their sexual physical responses being triggered by risk and guilt when their actions are not consistent with what they believe. Those patterns continue into marriage. We can help teens when we strongly affirm that God wants them to have a wonderful, delightful, and fulfilling sex life in marriage and that their sexual actions before marriage will affect their sex life in marriage.

Parents can also talk about how to build meaningful connection with someone of the opposite sex without having sex.

Telling adolescents about the importance of learning to relate without moving to sex, which can give a sense of quick but false intimacy, often falls on deaf ears. But we can make a difference when we lead young people to think about their friendships and verbalize the ingredients of those relationships that have been particularly significant for them and aren't about sex.

To help young people make healthy sexual choices, we need to teach them *decision-making*. We like to use an image of a ladder to explain that our sexual actions are like climbing a ladder; the higher on the ladder, the more difficult it becomes to step down. It is most effective to enlist young adolescents in this decision-making process before or as they are starting to date or be alone in a potentially romantic relationship. Rather than tell them where to "draw the line," ask them to decide to what extent they will engage in physical contact. Discuss what situations could cause them to cross that boundary, as well as the supportive relationships they need to help them maintain the physical limits and commitments they have identified.

#### WHAT IF OUR TEENAGER CROSSES THE LINE?

When our kids make choices that are not consistent with their own commitments or with our held values, it is natural to react. Or, maybe more accurately, overreact. Resist that temptation and do all you can to gather data and have a heart-to-heart with your child to understand what happened and why, as well as the impact it has had on him or her. Don't confront or lecture; have a conversation and listen more than you talk. Express your unconditional love. Be a student of parenting and of each of your children. Let your child know that your forgiveness and God's forgiveness

transcend their choices. By God's grace, they can experience the full life God intends in all areas of their life, including their sexuality.

As we have journeyed with our own kids and grandkids and talked with countless families nationwide, we have found these words popularly attributed to William A. Foster to be both life-giving and encouraging when it comes to growing teenagers:

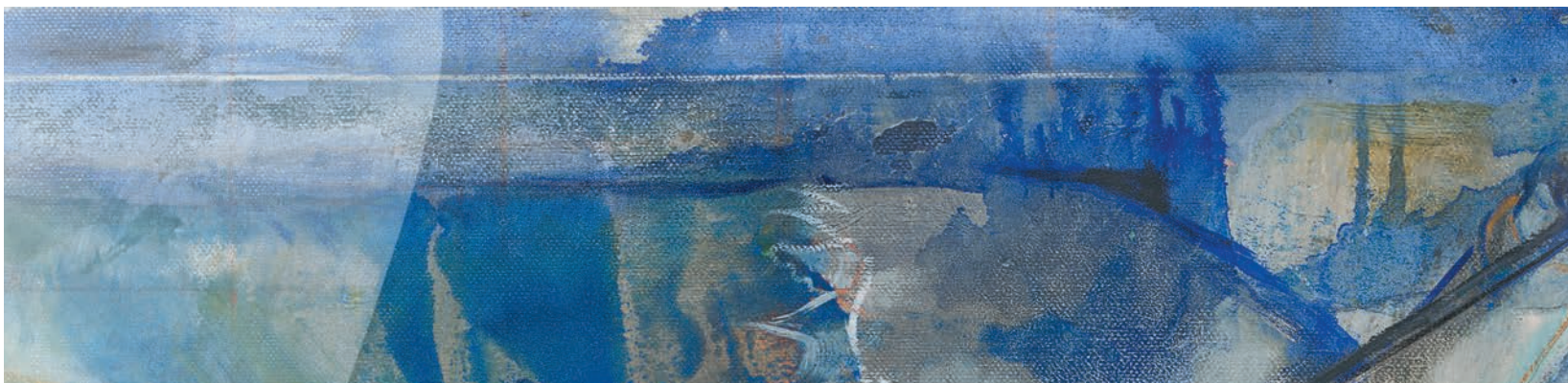
*Quality is never an accident;  
It is always the result of high intention,  
Sincere effort, intelligent direction  
And skillful execution;  
It represents the wise choice of many  
alternatives.*



#### ENDNOTES

1. Stan Jones and Brenna Jones, *How and When to Tell Your Kids about Sex: A Lifelong Approach to Shaping Your Child's Sexual Character* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007), 32.
2. Those two data sets are the National Study of Youth and Religion and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 60–73.
3. "United States Teens," Guttmacher Institute, <https://www.guttmacher.org/united-states/teens>.
4. "US Teen Pregnancy, Birth and Abortion Rates Reach the Lowest Levels in Almost Four Decades," Guttmacher Institute, <https://www.guttmacher.org/news-release/2016/us-teen-pregnancy-birth-and-abortion-rates-reach-lowest-levels-almost-four-decades>.
5. Jones and Jones, *How and When*, 161.





## SCIENCE AND EMERGING ADULTS

A recent study reported in David Kinnaman's book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* found that 52 percent of youth group teens aspire to science-related careers—and yet, in the midst of this interest, the church's inability to engage science and faith is one key reason emerging adults are leaving churches today.

February of 2016 saw the launch of a three-year project focusing on Science & Theology for Emerging Adult Ministries (STEAM) that seeks to equip church and parachurch ministries to foster a more fruitful engagement with the insights of mainstream science.

The STEAM project will aim to engage emerging adults (ages 18–30) in the integration of science with Christian life, practice, and theology in the following ways:

- Funding select emerging adult ministries in congregations and parachurch organizations;
- Creating excellent, usable resources;
- Coaching and training ministry leaders in the integration of science and theology; and
- Developing web and social media resources related to these activities.

Historically, the demographic of emerging adults sets the tone and substance for much of US culture; thus, the engagement of this age group around science and faith is strategic both in the lives of the individuals and in the shaping of culture. Find more at [thesteamproject.org](http://thesteamproject.org).

✦ *Greg Cootsona is project leader of STEAM and research associate professor of theology in the School of Theology at Fuller. Dave Navarra (MDiv '16) is an off-site coleader of the STEAM project while serving students at Community Presbyterian Church in northern California. The project is housed at Fuller Seminary's Office for Science, Theology, and Religion (STAR) Initiatives, and is made possible by a \$2 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation.*





## ADOPTIVE YOUTH MINISTRY: INTEGRATING EMERGING GENERATIONS INTO THE FAMILY OF FAITH

Chap Clark

Chap Clark is professor of youth, family, and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary and directs Fuller's related master's and doctoral programs. He has authored or coauthored two dozen books, including the award-winning *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, *Sticky Faith*, and *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*. Clark holds an MA and MDiv from Fuller and PhD from the University of Denver. He and his wife, Dee, have three grown children.

*So, even in my old age with gray hair, don't abandon me, God! Not until I tell generations about your mighty arm, tell all who are yet to come about your strength. (Psalm 71:18 CEB)*

For the last several decades as we have equipped, trained, enticed and, at times, begged adults to care for kids in the name of Christ, youth ministry has been the particular calling of the few as representatives of the many to make disciples of our children and emerging adults.

In the early 20th century, American youth ministry grew out of the tent revival movement, later morphing into what became known as parachurch ministries. The message was rooted in the evangelism practices of the day, which were both individualistic and pietistic. Along the way, depending on tradition and denomination, churches began to take up the cause of reaching out to the young in their own style, with their own leadership and dedicated space. This was a time when young people were feeling increasingly marginalized and US culture was going through the beginnings of generational fragmentation. Even in the church, congregational youth ministry soon took root as a staple of congregational life. By the 1980s, youth ministry had largely secured its place in church structure and strategy.

Throughout its history, in both parachurch contexts and in congregations, the seeds of personal faith and individual piety have remained the core drivers of youth ministry. The pragmatism of the early years brought together a wide diversity of practitioners to the youth ministry community, and at the same time held at bay the deeper theological grounding that was desperately needed. In the midst of a focus on content ("Jesus") and

target population ("kids"),<sup>1</sup> other questions kept challenging the dominant pragmatism: What happens to our students when they graduate from high school? Where do they go? Where do they fit? Many have recently agreed that youth ministry, with all its rich history and impact on the church, needs to move beyond a small group of committed youth workers and find its place as an expression of the local and global body of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

### ADOPTIVE MINISTRY: LIVING INTO OUR MUTUAL ADOPTION

John's gospel opens with God's decisive and cumulative redemptive act—the Incarnation of the Word who was "with God" and "was God" (John 1:1). Between those first words and the ultimate outcome described in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (*The Message*), a sentence is included that summarizes the blessing of the Incarnation for all of humanity: "But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children" (John 1:12). The magnitude of this statement cannot be overestimated, but it has not only most often been reduced to the singular ("I am now a child of God"), but also has effectively been treated as an anecdotal accessory of the benefit of faith. Note the plural, however: "authorized to become God's children." We once were not a "child of God," but now in and through Christ, we are his children. We've been reclaimed and renewed, and the result is our restoration as God's own sons and daughters—together.

This, then, is the essence of adoptive youth ministry. We all—young and old, rich and poor, clergy and laity, regardless of ethnicity or status or power; all of us—were once estranged as orphans, and we are given a new place, a new home, and a new family. "He lifted *us* out of the pit of death, out of the mud and filth; he set *our* feet on solid rock.



He steadied *our* legs” (Psalm 40:2, as plural reality). The goal of youth ministry can no longer be to “make individual faithful disciples,” but rather to strategically, structurally, and proactively include the young as vital members of the household of God. The goal of *adoptive* youth ministry, then, is to equip and invite the young to live into their calling as children with God’s other children.

#### WHAT ADOPTIVE YOUTH MINISTRY IS NOT

To understand what adoptive ministry is, it is important to know what adoptive ministry is not because it can be easily misunderstood. It is not the following:

*1. Adopting the young.* This is, I admit, how I first envisioned adoptive ministry. If adults saw children and emerging adults as their own “adopted” children, then they would have a greater sense of responsibility for and compassion toward them. In a summit of youth ministry leaders a few years ago, it became clear that this use of the term “adoption” was in fact no different from “assimilation,” which in essence was saying to young people, “You become like us and then we will accept you.” In that hierarchy, power and dominance unintentionally taint relationships. Even the most benevolent adult who treated a young person as an “adopted child/niece/grandchild” still speaks from a basic position of power. This is not the biblical vision Paul was planting. In adoptive youth ministry we must hold a higher view of our young, while we still recognize that they are in developmental transition and therefore in need of proactive nurture.

*2. Maintaining the status quo.* “This adoption stuff you’re talking about may be biblical, but it’s also radical. Do you realize this?” This insightful comment came from a senior pastor who was wrestling with the implications of Paul’s theology for congregational life and

practice. Adoptive ministry so values the newly included sibling that the community itself knows it must become something new. To live into our mutual adoption in Christ brings a fresh look to the way we staff, structure, and program our life together. The more we allow the Bible to teach us, the more disruptive it will be to our way of “doing church.”

*3. Doing away with targeted programming.* While every adoptive system must adapt, I do not advocate for making sweeping, wholesale changes without a thorough and prayerful process that includes careful, communal reflection. In fact, much of the programming we have in place may actually be enhanced were we to take our place and status together seriously. So many, especially our most vulnerable subgroups (e.g., youth and children’s ministry, but also senior adult and single ministries) must be given opportunities for safe and welcoming relational environments and experiences in order to be effectively welcomed into the larger community of faith. Targeted population ministries provide such safe places, but members must never be satisfied to remain only there. The challenge, then, is to see these structures as gateways into a greater experience of unity in the body, guarding against a functional “we/they” separation.

#### WHAT ADOPTIVE YOUTH MINISTRY IS

Many practitioners and thought leaders have come to recognize the value of practices that draw God’s people into more intentional connection with one another. For example, the Fuller Youth Institute’s *Sticky Faith* research has helped scores of churches encourage parents and congregations to take a more active role in a young person’s faith journey. Parental partnership with youth ministry and intentional intergenerational opportunities are good examples of adoptive youth ministry in action. However, without a foundational

## A MOSAIC OF ADOPTION

I remember having hard conversations, as a Doctor of Ministry student, with professor Chap Clark and my cohort about “assimilation” being elevated as a primary goal of youth ministry. Assimilation was a tough word to stomach, because it dragged along with it the pain of having to become like “them” to be let in. Adoption, however, is different. Rather than making someone change, adoption means embracing them for who they are. Across cultures, ethnicities, denominations, and generations, everyone wants to be embraced.

As a pastor of a historic African American church, it is easy for me to explain adoption. My congregation understands being part of a disenfranchised people group. They understand wanting to be “celebrated, not tolerated.” Yet while we accept it culturally and philosophically, we struggle to execute it generationally. Convincing people who sometimes feel powerless to share their power with those who are even more powerless than themselves is a tough task. Yet we push through it.

Our youth lead out in praise and worship and our mature saints relish singing “timeless” hymns, which my young people have calculated are around 400 years old. The colors of the different identities, personalities, generations, and cultures form a beautiful mosaic. To be honest, we are not *always* one big happy family, but we are definitely a family—“his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of his love” (Ephesians 1:5 CEB).

+ *Andrea King (DMin ’11) is senior pastor of 16th Street Seventh-day Adventist Church in San Bernardino, California.*



theological grounding from which to develop, these and other programs can easily devolve into mere programs among many others. Adoptive youth ministry provides a basic theological core from which strategy and programs emerge. Having this philosophical center, intergenerational relationships then become contextual applications for living out mutual adoption in Christ.

Adoptive ministry, therefore, is the following:

*1. Living into our mutual adoption in Christ.* Adoptive youth ministry does not seek to encourage adults to “adopt” kids, but rather to remind each member to live into their own story of adoption within the *family of adopted siblings*. The gospel is the great leveler. All have been lost, all have been orphaned, and we all are powerless to rescue ourselves without the saving mercy of God to bring us back home as his children (John 1:12, again note the plural). So a 75-year-old former banker is an adopted son of God living in a family among other sons and daughters of God, and as such he has been given the blessing of a sibling relationship with a 15-year-old daughter of the King. He must not treat her as a surrogate grandchild, or even daughter, but rather with the respect and inclusion of a fellow sinner saved by grace and given the gift of adoption, just like him. This, in and of itself, changes everything. Youth ministry people have known this for decades: the 75-year-old man needs his 15-year-old “little sister” every bit as much as she needs him.

*2. Adults being intentional about voice, empowerment, and inclusion for the young.* Our dean in Fuller’s School of Theology, Joel B. Green, notes that in the Gospel of Luke, “Jesus’ mission [opens] the way for the inclusion of people in God’s kingdom, who otherwise have no apparent claim on God.”<sup>3</sup> Every congregation contains those who feel “included” and those who do not. Those who hold the power, whether formally or environmentally, have greater responsibility to both nurture and

empower vulnerable sisters and brothers into maturity and thriving. Again, intergenerational ministry programs can be life changing for both the old and the young, but all too often these types of initiatives break down because the adults feel slighted that the young do not initiate with them. A commitment to adoptive ministry means that adults, regardless of age, must be trained and equipped to think like older siblings who also are charged with the ministry of nurture and empowerment. It is not up to the outsider to seek inclusion with the more mature, which is a common fallacy perpetuated in the church. Rather, older siblings have the responsibility to guide and serve younger siblings.

*3. Understanding the role of leadership in the adoptive church.* I have always wondered why most of the Reformers were so exegetically careful with so many of the excesses of the dominant church, but somehow left in place the hierarchy and subsequent separation of leadership from laity. This obviously deserves deeper consideration, but one thing is certain. Throughout the New Testament, leadership is not a permit for those in power to stand above or even separate from the congregation, but rather is a call to a servant’s role based on gifts, history, and communal affirmation to perform two functions (aside from direct ecclesial duties, such as sacraments): maintain the continuity of the gospel and ensure the integrity of the body (e.g., Acts 2:42 and Acts 6:1–6). This means that a deacon, elder, or pastor is different in role but not status in the household of God. In a fallen world, the Scriptures make clear that we all need each other, and we all have various gifts and resources to contribute (1 Corinthians 12). Leaders therefore must take the lead in modeling, teaching, and equipping the adopted siblings of God to live together in unity and love.

I offer adoptive youth ministry, then, as a grounding biblical and theological metaphor that can guide us to a greater awareness of and sensitivity







toward one another in Christ. As young people grow, they need their parents to be equipped, and they need the body of Jesus Christ to both nurture and empower them as full participants in the kingdom of God. Using the familial language of Scripture levels the playing field in a hierarchical world, reimagines the value of the young, the disconnected, and the vulnerable, and draws God's people together as siblings in a world of radical isolation and generational atomization. As Fuller professor Dennis Guernsey wrote in 1982:

*The church of the first century was called to leave their earthly familial allegiances and to bond to one another as the new family of God. The revolutionary impact of the first-century church was their love for one another as Christ had commanded them. The need for the church in the [21st] century is to respond as they responded. We are the church and we are family. Let us get on with our business.*<sup>4</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Although both of these distinctive historical markers of youth ministry, "Jesus" and "kids," have led us into greater depth in our grounding of youth ministry and have given rise to significant discussion regarding what we mean by "Jesus" and who qualifies as a "kid."
2. An example of this can be found in the Fuller Youth Institute article by Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, "Why Ecclesiology? Imagining a New Theology of Youth Ministry for the Church" (August 23, 2007), <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/why-ecclesiology>.
3. Joel B. Green, *Why Salvation?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 107.
4. Dennis B. Guernsey, *A New Design for Family Ministry* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries International, 1982), 112.





## WHERE DO TWENTYSOMETHINGS FIT IN OUR WORLD TODAY?

Steven C. Argue

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**Y**oung, tech-savvy, fashion-forward people in their 20s seem to be the envy of both young and old. So why would we wonder where they fit in our world today? As I have been researching, pastoring, and parenting “twentysomethings,” it has become evident that this group is having a hard time fitting into our social structures, our churches, and our families. They don’t lack the desire to fit in; they lack the navigational resources, markers, and support to find their way in an adult world.

In popular literature, I read of twentysomethings (or “Millennials”) as both the problem and the hope for the future. I talk with parents who are faced with unanticipated questions and emotions as their kids “boomerang” home after graduating college, choose jobs outside their majors, and delay marriage and parenting plans. I consult with Christian leaders who perpetually ask in hushed voices, “Where have they gone, and how do we get them back?” So maybe the question of fit has some merit, although I propose we frame the question in more helpful ways.

It is likely that this group can’t and won’t fit the existing assumptions of previous generations, the traditional trajectories toward adulthood, or the participatory expectations of faith communities. This has drawn tremendous worry, suspicion, and even blame from adults. What emerging adults need, however, is greater understanding. This understanding may be trickier than we think, because to generalize any group of people fails to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of each person. If, however, we acknowledge this limitation and resist stereotyping, then we can shed light on some of the common aspects of young people in their 20s that may bring both better understanding

and appreciation of their particular journeys.

In Christian contexts this is especially important. When adults accuse young people of “leaving church,” we often misinterpret the dynamics of what might actually be occurring. As a result, uninformed accusations foster shame instead of grace, blame instead of love, and division instead of unity. Inadvertently, parents, church leaders, and employers proclaim a gospel that limits grace, makes love conditional, and segments relationships. The oneness for which Jesus prays requires us to live in the light of incarnation by inhabiting emerging adult spaces and seeking to understand them on their terms (John 17; Philippians 2). This posture will require both courage and a renewed imagination toward what we call them, how we see them, and how we support them.

### WHAT SHOULD WE CALL THEM?

What if we started by *not* calling them twentysomethings? Besides sounding generically dismissive (what is a “something”?), this term also fails to capture the multifaceted nature of the lives and challenges young people face. Some researchers have tried to do better by naming this group “Millennials,” drawing from generational theory for help.<sup>1</sup> Millennials are described as individuals born between approximately 1980 and 2000. Their parents are often Gen-Xers and their grandparents, Boomers. Generation Z (also called iGen, Post-Millennials, Centennials, or Plurals) follow them. Millennials are often described culturally as having certain attitudes about work, technology, politics, and religion. Depending on one’s perspective, the term *Millennial* is used to evoke hope or disdain. When we draw sharp distinctions between generations, however, we risk creating too much or too little hope in the “next” generation. Adults then often superimpose expect-

tations upon a younger generation that lead to lamenting “young people these days,” or selectively reminiscing about their own past with words like “When I was your age . . .” The moment adults utter these phrases, they’ve betrayed the unique aspects of young peoples’ journeys today. The biggest challenge with using the Millennial label is that it remains too broad, missing the uniqueness within this group (currently ages 16–36!) and downplaying developmental, cultural, and life-stage differences.

If not twentysomethings or Millennials, what term might help us better define this season? “Emerging adulthood” is a phrase coined by Jeffrey Arnett that describes a unique stage of development for those ages 18 to 26. Emerging adults—those who no longer consider themselves adolescents, but have yet to see themselves as adults—predominantly live in post-industrial societies where the cultural norms for marrying, having children, or entering a career are delayed. This identified developmental period has emerged in academic research more recently, as young people have reported needing more training to enter the workforce and thus delaying both marriage and childbearing, choices that afford them more options and autonomy during this period of their lives. Developmentally, emerging adults report not feeling like adults and being somewhat resistant to the constraints associated with adulthood. Arnett has identified five main features of emerging adulthood, as (1) the age of identity exploration, trying out various possibilities—especially in love and work; (2) the age of instability; (3) the most self-focused period of life; (4) the age of feeling in between, in transition, and neither adolescent nor adult; and (5) the age of possibilities, when hopes flourish and

when these individuals have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives and focus them more specifically.<sup>2</sup>

#### HOW SHALL WE SEE THEM?

When we acknowledge the unique period emerging adults navigate to find their fit, we see that they have more opportunities than ever; they have more worries as they navigate their unstable lives and unstable world; they have more need to focus on themselves because they feel isolated and stressed; they have more ambiguity as they live in between adolescence and adulthood with few defined cultural markers; and they have more optimism despite their life challenges. As a result, they need more education and more time to prepare for adulthood; they are more cautious of lasting relationships because they have seen many adults’ relationships fail; and they need more time to become financially independent because they are burdened by student loans, low-paying jobs, and limited career options. Thus, the adult markers valued by previous generations—getting a job, getting married, or parenthood—are not the measures emerging adults use for reaching adulthood. Adulthood arrives when they are able to accept responsibility for their actions, make independent decisions, and become financially independent. These goals drive emerging adults’ trajectories and become important interpretive lenses for their actions.

#### LET’S SUPPORT, NOT FIX

When we understand the developmental, sociological, and theological opportunities and challenges facing emerging adults, we better support them. Support, however, must resist “fixing” emerging adults. Instead, it calls for all adults to critically self-reflect on their own lives and consider

how emerging adults’ perspectives shed light on their own worldviews. While this piece only presents high-level considerations, it might offer starting points for your home, church, or workplace.

*Parents, remember that faith and struggle are contagious.*<sup>3</sup> The good news for parents is that emerging adults’ relationships with their parents typically are *better* than when they were adolescents. While these findings are hopeful, the anxiety of parenting (my wife and I included!) doesn’t disappear after high school graduation. Anxieties only shift as we hope our kids will make good choices, find their own paths, and take the best of their upbringing into their own lives. Often the frustration and anxiety parents feel isn’t because their kids are doing something wrong, it’s because parents’ own lives and faith perspectives are being challenged. When our children struggle emotionally, relationally, and spiritually, we struggle too. There is a certain *contagiousness* to faith. The ways our emerging adult children question, struggle, and live into their faith journeys evokes our own questions, struggles, and lifestyle choices. The temptation is to solve their problems so that *we* feel better instead of addressing the formational work we may need to address. As a parent, where do I need to let go, grow in *my own* worldview, and take *my own* steps of faith? Try this: Be open to hearing your emerging adult child’s views, questions, and longings. Ask them about their perspectives, and before you try to correct them, take inventory of your own emotions and beliefs. What might their questions, outlooks, and struggles teach you about your own faith journey?<sup>4</sup>

*Churches, remember that religion and spirituality are relational.* In my own research,



it became apparent that for many college undergraduates (younger emerging adults), their intellectual spiritual struggles were most felt relationally. In other words, emerging adults hesitated to share doubt for fear of disappointing the adults and leaders in their home churches. They also expressed frustration because their churches failed to see them beyond their gender or marital status. Programmatic limitations kept these emerging adults from staying connected with their churches and inspired them to find other communities where they could make spiritual and relational meaning.<sup>5</sup> Many of these same churches have responded with questions like, “Why are you leaving us?”—only adding insult to emerging adults’ already-vulnerable dispositions. Churches must reimagine and redefine their relationships with emerging adults. Emerging adults are seeking connection beyond prefabricated programmatic categories. They have more to offer and more to benefit from our faith communities if churches welcome not only their attendance, but also their ideas, questions, and relationships. Try this: Instead of inviting emerging adults to join your church’s existing programs, ask them, “Where do you see injustice in our world? What can we do to support your vision to address this challenge?” Emphasize grassroots participation over programmatic attendance.<sup>6</sup>

*Employers, remember that for emerging adults, work is self-narrating.* Gone are the days when employees dedicate lifelong work to a company that promises to take care of them with a guaranteed pension! I know a fellow scholar who teaches college seniors in a capstone course. He teaches that they must advocate for themselves and continue to develop their skills because jobs are not “sure things” and our knowledge economy is perpetually demanding lifelong self-improvement. Emerging adults are often accused of being disloyal to companies that promise them little. I have found that in the internship programs I have developed and run, emerging adults are looking to work for something they believe in and for mentors who can give them feedback both on their work and on themselves. Employers, including churches, will best develop emerging leaders if they are willing to hire and

mentor the whole person. Try this: Commit to investing time in emerging adults to talk about their work and their lives in order to assist their pursuit toward work/life integration. This may require you to reimagine the metrics you use to define success and professional development.

Emerging adults are doing just that: emerging into adulthood. Their emerging journey to find their adult fit has unique, increased challenges and opportunities that need our understanding and support. Helping them *fit* in society, therefore, doesn’t mean *fixing* them. In fact, they can fit right where they are. With the right support, their emerging adult quests can be investments into their adult futures. With the right posture, their lives can inspire and challenge the worldviews of adults, churches, and communities. With the right vision, we can embody good news for all and risk being the supportive new community the church is called to be.

This is good news for emerging adults. This is good news for everyone.



#### ENDNOTES

1. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).
2. Jeffrey J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
3. I give credit for this concept of “contagious” faith and struggle to A. Astin, H. Astin, J. Lindholm, A. Bryant, S. Calderone, and K. Szelenyi, “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose” (Los Angeles: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). They discuss the relational aspect of faith between peers. I believe this also contributes to the parent-child relationship.
4. For a Fuller Youth Institute interview on parenting emerging adults, see “Three Parenting Questions for Steve Argue,” <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/3-steve-argue>.
5. Steven C. Argue, “Supporting Undergraduate Spirituality: College-Related Factors Evangelical Christian Students Perceive as Affecting their Working through Spiritual Struggle while Attending a Public University,” Order No. 3681792 (Michigan State University, 2015), <http://proxy.fuller.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1658058438?accountid=11008>.
6. For another brief piece on what it means for churches to define their relationships with emerging adults, see Steven C. Argue, “It’s Time to Define the Relationship with Our Emerging Adults” (September 2014), <http://youthspecialties.com/blog/its-time-to-define-the-relationship-with-our-emerging-adults/>.





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