



The Faith Formation of Young Adults: Opportunities and Challenges

Joan Weber

Imagine ten young adults serving at the local soup kitchen all day, then going to a popular pub for pizza and beer. As they eat, they talk about seeing the face of God in the people they served earlier. One young man brings up Matthew 25, and they all begin to make connections between the Gospel call and what they did at the soup kitchen. As they go deeper into the message of Jesus in the Gospels, they feel called to e-mail their state representatives about changes needed in state law in order to defend the dignity of the homeless and obtain affordable housing for them.

Imagine a group of young adults gathering in someone's condo at 9 p.m. on a Wednesday night, working through a lectionary-based small group resource on the upcoming Sunday Scripture readings. Picture that same group at Sunday worship, completely engaged in the songs, readings, and prayers of the liturgy, which they keep connecting to the themes they discovered in the readings five days earlier.

Imagine several young adults walking out of a movie theater, having an animated discussion about the values and morals of the movie's lead characters. Listen as one young woman describes the inspiration she got from the heroine in the story and how the movie itself made her feel a sense of holiness and closeness to God. Watch other young adults describe the movie as a faith experience for them, too.

Imagine a group of twenty young adults gathered at your church in a room with couches and comfortable chairs. There is a small table in the middle of the room with a colorful cloth icon of Jesus, and a lit candle. Listening in, you hear the young adults discussing the meaning and importance of the Eucharist in their lives. One poses a question that the group can't answer, so an adult catechism is opened to the section on sacraments, the answer is found, and the discussion continues.

Can you imagine these scenarios for the young adults in your church? Are they probable? Are they even within the realm of possibility? Does your church provide the opportunity for such encounters?

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The faith formation of young adults today presents unique challenges as well as graced opportunities for those in church ministry. It demands that we *think outside the box*, being open to ways of doing faith formation that have never been done before. It also requires humility on the part of the older generations, both the humility of realizing that previously “tried and true” methods need reshaping for a new generation of adults and the humility of letting young adults lead us in discovering what the new methods are. It means trusting that the Spirit is active in the lives of young adults who express their faith and their spirituality in ways that may seem foreign—perhaps even irreverent—to older Christians.

Young Adult Development and Faith Growth

In this twenty-first century, who are the young adults in our midst? They are people in their late teens, twenties, and thirties who “earnestly search for meaning in their lives; they value solidarity with the rest of humanity and seek to commit themselves to the cause of social justice” (NDC, 195). On the other hand, many young adults have been captivated and shaped by the consumerism and materialism of U.S. society.

Today’s young adults include two different generations of postmoderns: Generation Xers,

in their lives. Consequently, they were shaped by popular culture in an unprecedented way. While they are open to the Christian community providing them with a new opportunity for community, they will only come if they are accepted for who they are and welcomed unconditionally.

Unlike Gen Xers, Millennials were and continue to be shaped by huge disasters, both natural and man-made: the terrorist attacks in 2001, the tsunami in Southeast Asia, and Hurricane Katrina. Watching these tragedies unfold created in them a deep yearning for a safe haven in an unsafe world. Many of them see religion as that safe haven.

James Davidson, Dean Hoge, William D’Antonio, and their colleagues have researched generational differences among Catholics every six years since 1987. Their research highlights several key features of postmodern, Catholic young adults. While their research focuses on Catholic young adults, many of these features can also be seen in young adults in other Christian churches. The report states that young adult Catholics do not have a strong sense of Catholic identity, although they do identify themselves as Catholic. They feel very comfortable with picking and choosing which elements of the Catholic faith they believe and which they don’t. As an example, 64% of Catholic young adults surveyed by Hoge stated that they felt a person could be a good Catholic without going to Mass (Hoge, 54). When asked which elements of faith they see as essential, less than 50% of them included the following:

- ♦ having a pope (48%)
- ♦ having a daily prayer life (41%)
- ♦ private confession to a priest (32%)

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The grace of young adult faith formation lies in the reality that the goal of faith formation is what young adults yearn for: communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ, which leads them to live their lives in new ways as his disciples. In order to provide young adults with an environment in which conversion to discipleship can happen, we need to know the young adults in our faith communities, be they in the pews, in our own families, or just sleeping-in on Sunday.

born between 1961 and 1980, and Millennials, born after 1980. While they have much in common, their approach to faith is somewhat unique because of their different worldviews. Xers were the first generation in history to experience the weakening of community within the family through widespread divorce, a geographic disconnect from the extended family, and their experiences of being latchkey kids. In their hunger for community, they often made television families their communities (e.g., *The Brady Bunch*). Media became a focal point

- ♦ teachings that oppose the death penalty (22%) (Hoge, 203).

Consequently, the boundaries of Catholic identity have become porous for this generation. What Catholicism meant for older generations was clear and defined; that is just not true for young people today, who see Catholicism as a religion of choice rather than obligation. And many of them see it as one choice among many other viable choices.

Traditional foundations for faith formation, which we took for granted with pre-Vatican II and Vatican II Catholics (also known as the World War II and the Baby Boom generations), cannot be counted on with post-Vatican II Catholics. Many of them haven't gone through what John Westerhoff called the first ring of faith formation, experiential faith, because they were brought up in a secular culture. Their experiences of Catholicism were haphazard at best. They were not apprenticed into the faith the way their parents and grandparents were. Does this mean that the affiliative, searching, and owned faith stages that Westerhoff also described are somehow postponed for young adults?

Another challenge to the faith formation of young adults is what Dennis Doyle describes as the bifurcation of spirituality from organized religion in his article "Young Catholics and their Faith: Is Being Spiritual Enough?" He named the reality that many young people today actively pursue spiritual experiences, but do not identify with or participate in a particular religion. He concluded, "This bifurcation is problematic, since an unmoored spirituality runs the risk of offering insufficient institutional challenge or direction." How then do we draw young adults into our faith formation efforts so

that they have the knowledge and support they need to moor their spirituality? How do we help them experience the Gospel critique of popular culture and the direction that only a faith community can truly provide?

Many young adults have a deep and abiding faith. They are in need of ongoing faith formation and support over the lifetime journey of conversion. Many other young adults are in need of a "new evangelization" that is directed to "the baptized who were never effectively evangelized before, to those who have never made a personal commitment to Christ and the Gospel, to those formed by the values of the secularized culture, to those who have lost a sense of faith, and to those who are alienated" (NDC, 47).

Today's young adults are pragmatic. They want to know why: why they should believe, what's in it for them, how it will help them in their everyday lives. They are technologically savvy, used to getting information instantly and succinctly, consumer-driven, and very spiritual. No matter where young adults are on the journey of faith, they are called to conversion and discipleship. The challenge for churches in the twenty-first century is determining how to support their conversion and continually echo Jesus' call to young adults to come and follow him.

Characteristics of Faith Formation with Young Adults

In 1997, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults*. The pastoral plan addressed all aspects of ministry with young adults, such as evangelization, pastoral care, and community life. The most effective faith formation with young adults takes place in a church where a comprehensive ministry understands the concerns of young adults, and candidly addresses the questions they ask and the problems they face. There are four goals for this comprehensive ministry with young adults:

1. to connect young adults with Jesus Christ
2. to connect young adults with the Christian community
3. to connect young adults with the mission of the Christian community in the world
4. to connect young adults with a peer community who share their values and beliefs.

Our goal is forming young adults in Christ and teaching for discipleship. This echoes Christ's proposal to the young man: "Come, follow me." We must find ways to let young adults know that "Christ

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loves them and needs them and that they are vital members of the Body of Christ, the Church” (NDC, 198).

Inviting young adults to explore the Christian faith the way Jesus invited the apostles to examine his values and beliefs makes sense with a generation brought up to “try before they buy” in all other aspects of their lives. Consider the following suggestions for inviting young adults into a life of discipleship.

- 1. Environment:** Provide a non-threatening place where they can freely express their questions, doubts, and even disagreements with Christian teachings, where those teachings can be clearly articulated and related to their experience. Every church owes this type of forum to its young adults. Creating an environment in which they can explore their faith through lively discussions and interaction, through questions and applications to their daily lives, through debate and rebuttal, can only lead to stronger, deeper adult faith.
- 2. Contact:** Provide significant points of contact for young adults with the faith community. The more young adults intersect with the life of the church, the more likely they are to experience the Christian faith. Mentoring and an apprenticeship in the faith is an excellent way to introduce or enhance young adults’ experience of church life.
- 3. Vocation:** Assist young adults in examining their lives and discerning their life vocations. The average age for marriage in the U.S. today is twenty-seven for men and twenty-five for women. Consequently, most

people choose their vocation in young adulthood. This offers a challenge to teach young adults what discernment is (especially the difference between deciding and discerning), how to do it well, and how to apply it to all major life decisions, particularly in the choice of life vocation.

- 4. Decision-making:** Help young adults make moral decisions in light of the teachings of Christ and the Christian tradition. Provide them with a process for prayerful decision-making. Engage them with the Gospel message of love and fidelity, justice and forgiveness. Expose them to Christian teachings.
- 5. Liturgy:** Draw them into the liturgical life of the Christian community. Learning about and through liturgy—which includes the experience of liturgy as well as understanding—has such rich potential for the ongoing conversion of young adults. Challenge them to live as disciples—to be committed to Christ’s mission of making the kingdom of God a reality.
- 6. Adaptation:** The distance young adults may feel from the church can be bridged by an adaptation and approach to the language (mentality, sensibility, tastes, style, and vocabulary) employed in learning. The Christian community needs to speak the language of young adults, be that language Spanish or English, technology or music, instant messaging or art.

Guidelines for the faith formation of adults, in general, apply to *young* adults as well, even though many church leaders only think of middle-aged and senior

adults when designing adult faith formation. Effective religious formation of young adults takes into account and draws out their previous experiences of God to guide them deeper into their faith. It trusts that as adults they are self-motivated learners who are able to identify their spiritual and learning needs and, with the help of leaders and mentors, plan ways to meet those needs. It engages adults in a variety of learning experiences that include liturgy, Scripture study, prayer, home activities, and large and small group methods. Faith formation efforts should involve young adults themselves in the learning process so that they can teach and learn from one another.

Specifically, faith formation with young adults should have the following characteristics:

- 1. Knowledge:** Studies of young adults as well as personal interviews with them point to a genuine lack of knowledge about Christian identity and the faith tradition. At the Woodstock Forum in Washington, DC, James Davidson commented, “Belonging is not a problem; they [young adults] feel comfortable calling the church home. And I don’t think serving is a problem. It’s the believing that’s the problem.” Churches need to find ways to help young adults gain clarity about what it is we, as Christians believe. Thus the Creed provides a natural starting point for young adult faith formation.
- 2. Variety:** Offer a variety of both topical and programmatic formats, such as a series of evening classes, special one-evening presentations, retreat days, discussion groups, Bible study groups, and mentoring

relationships. These options should respond to the needs of the local young adult community. Variety is vital to a generation that has been exposed to interactive and dynamic learning processes from childhood.

themes such as formation of conscience, education for love, vocational discernment, Christian involvement in society, missionary responsibility in the world, the relationship between faith and reason, the existence and

peer teaching and mentoring makes sense.

Pastoral Approaches and Strategies for Faith Formation with Young Adults

Today's young adults did not, for the most part, get faith by osmosis. It is good for church leaders to think strategically, utilizing both systematic and *carpe diem* strategies for the faith formation of young adults. It is also important to remember that faith formation doesn't happen exclusively in classrooms or organized programs.

Young adults need opportunities to reflect, learn, question, and share their faith experiences across all the arenas of their lives, including the workplace, the home, recreational spaces, and the church community.

Churches that strive to be more responsive to young adults in their faith formation programs should examine their adult faith formation efforts to determine how effective these programs are. It is helpful to ask the following questions:

- When do we offer this program? Are the times conducive to young adult attendance?
- If we are offering a series, such as a lenten program on the six Wednesdays of Lent, do we let people know that if they can't make all six sessions, they are still welcome to come to whichever they can make?
- Is our promotion of the program attractive to young adults? Do we personally invite young adults to participate through one-on-one contacts or e-mails?

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- 3. Culture:** Use adult-centered methods that work within the culture of the participants. The culture of young adults includes both their ethnicity as well as the popular culture in which they live. "The inculturation of the Gospel is also a key criterion for the pastoral presentation of the Christian message because the Good News of Jesus Christ is intended for people of all cultures" (NDC, 82).
- 4. Media:** Take advantage of media and technology to share faith with young adults by making available print resources, audio and video programs, and online resources and communities. Young adults prefer short, to-the-point reading. Podcasts and other new innovations in technology can be used while traveling, exercising, or at home in the evening.
- 5. Themes:** Choose themes for faith formation that explore the Bible and Christian tradition around

meaning of God, the problem of evil, the relationship between man and woman, and the social teaching of Christ and the church. Also explore more personal themes and their connection to the gospel and Christian tradition, such as relationships, intimacy, sexuality, family life, culture, workplace ethics, morality, personal faith, and dealing with life's pain.

One final principle for young adult faith formation that has not been universally implemented was articulated at a national Catholic symposium on ministry with young adults in 2000. Leaders in ministry with young adults were asked to create an image of outreach to young adults for the new millennium. One group painted a word portrait of peer teaching and peer mentoring. The team described it in this way: we need to train young adults to share the faith with people their own age. Since older generations never experienced life the way young adults of today do,

- Do we engage learners in the process? Do we utilize shared Christian praxis or a similar method that connects the faith story to the daily lives of participants?
- Do we use media and technology to communicate the message?
- Do we have young adults on the design team for the learning session?

“Theology on Tap,” a national program developed in the Archdiocese of Chicago over twenty-five years ago, remains the most effective and widely used faith formation program for young adults. What makes it so successful? First of all, it takes place on neutral territory: in a bar, a coffeehouse, or some other place where young adults feel comfortable. Secondly, it includes a focused amount of input from a guest speaker on a topic of interest to young adults. It creates a climate in which the young adults can engage in dialogue with the speaker, asking questions, challenging assumptions, and acquiring answers. It is a chance for young adults to come together with their peers, particularly peers who are seekers like themselves. The opportunity for socializing after the formal part of the session is also a plus. A very attractive feature of “Theology on Tap” is that it doesn’t require a long-term commitment. Most sites offer a four or six-week series, then take time off before another is offered. And young adults know that they aren’t “required” to attend all six!

Many churches across the country have created their own faith formation format for young adult programs. A church in Omaha, NE has monthly Welcome Nights in which a guest speaker gives a presentation, then interacts

with the young adults through questions and answers. This is followed by informal social time. The church consistently draws fifty or more young adults to these monthly sessions. The young adults themselves choose the topics.

Because young adults are so hungry for the connection between their faith and their lives, church leaders need to be somewhat flexible and spontaneous in selecting topics for young adult faith formation. To do this churches offer evenings of discussion and input on topics that connect to the everyday lives of their young adults. One way of doing this is by watching what is in the news *right now*. As an example, a church in the San Francisco area held a session on just war when the U.S. went to war in Iraq.

Announcements were made at Sunday worship that war from a Christian faith perspective would be discussed on Tuesday night. With just two days notice, the church drew 180 young adults to the dialogue. Another way to achieve this goal is to just listen to what young adults are talking about—their fears, doubts, and dreams.

Whatever the topic, the method of delivery for young adult faith formation needs to be one that connects the young adult’s life experience to the faith story. The Shared Christian Praxis methodology of Thomas Groome does this effectively. The focusing

activity reminds us that we must first give young adults a reason to learn their faith. With Gen Xers, this needs to be fairly pragmatic, answering the “why should I” and “what will I get out of it” questions that young adults pose. The five movements of praxis surround the teachings of the Bible and Christian Tradition with the learners’ own experiences, moving the teaching from head to heart to hands and feet. The first two movements, experiencing life and reflecting on life, invite the young adults to examine an issue of living, such as suffering, faithfulness, or justice, in their own lives. The third movement, sharing the faith story, provides the teachings of the Bible and Tradition. Movements four and five invite the learners to integrate the faith story into their own lives through reflection and action.

Contemplation

A significant element of faith formation that supports young adults in their conversion is contemplation. One of the things young adults yearn for is quiet—probably because there is so little of it in their everyday lives. As Michael Hayes of Busted.Halo.com puts it, “We need to have moments of contemplation and awe that evoke deep mystery within the hearts and minds of the young faithful.”

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Providing young adults with opportunities like *lectio divina*, Taize prayer experiences, and retreats is critical. But it's also important to think of the delivery system for these experiences in new ways. For example, most young adults would probably see themselves as too busy for a traditional weekend retreat. But we can direct them toward podcasts of the daily Scripture readings (uscgb.org/nab) or a complete Ignatian retreat online (creighton.edu/collaborativeministry).

Because there is often a disconnect between religion and life in the minds of young adults, teaching them the art of theological reflection is an effective way to support them on their faith journey.

We need to assist young adults in examining their lives and engaging them in dialogue about the great questions they face, to help them make these crucial decisions in accord with God's will and their faith. Churches would do well to offer young adults retreat-like evenings in which they follow a process for reflection:

1. Choose a topic that you hear young adults wrestling with in their own lives.
2. Invite them to come for one evening of reflection on the topic. (It is important to emphasize that this is not a series or an ongoing commitment on their part.)
3. Do good welcoming and hospitality.
4. Share a story from your own life of how you reflected on the topic.
5. Invite the young adults to identify and share the voices in their lives that give an opinion on what they should do about the issue, including their families, friends, colleagues at work or school, the popular culture, their

ethnic culture, and finally, their faith.

6. Engage them in prayerfully listening to God's voice among all the other voices bombarding them with suggestions. Ask them what Scripture passages come to mind. Provide copies of theologically sound resource material related to the topic. Encourage them to search for guidelines to help them hear God's voice.
7. Invite the whole group into reflective prayer, lifting up their remaining questions and asking God for the courage and wisdom to make the right decision about the issue.
8. Close with social time for those who wish to stay.

struggling to alleviate makes sense. It also respects the busy lives of young adults. Rather than doing a service project and a separate learning program on the Christian teaching on hunger or racism or immigration, weaving the teachings into the service experience makes good use of time. The pastoral circle method of engaging in the topic, doing social analysis of the injustice, reflecting on the scriptural and Christian social teachings about the issue, and choosing a course of action is an effective technique for this.

Another strategy for faith formation is to capitalize on times when young adults come to the church for the celebration of a sacrament, such as marriage or the baptism of their child. There is an openness on the part of young

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Opportunities for Faith Formation within Existing Programs and Ministries

One key strategy for faith formation with young adults is building on strengths rather than weaknesses. Since service is a passion among today's young adults, weaving faith formation into a service project sets churches up for success. Introducing gospel stories and Christian social teachings *in the context* of whatever injustice the young adults are

adults who voluntarily come to the church for a sacrament, and we should take advantage of that openness to share the Good News. For example:

- ♦ Use the Christian initiation (RCIA) of young adults to engage involved young adults as their sponsors. In doing so, they receive a deeper sense of their Christian identity.
- ♦ Use marriage preparation as an opportunity to connect young adults with Jesus and with the church community. This

includes situating the actual marriage preparation within the larger themes of God's love, fidelity, covenant, etc.

- ♦ Use preparation for infant baptism to strengthen the faith of the parents (young adults) and their relationship with church community. Young adults often confess that it took having a baby to recognize their lack of a faith identity and the need to learn more in order to pass on a faith tradition to their children.

Because there is a hunger for community and belonging in young adults, small faith-sharing groups are one way in which churches have gathered them to explore topics like Scripture, connecting faith and work, spirituality, and other themes. In addition to gathered strategies, there are many opportunities for supporting the ongoing formation of young adults that don't require gathering them. Taking advantage of young adults' familiarity with technology, we can share the Gospel message through e-mail, podcasts and viral videos of inspiring stories of faith and fidelity, and web sites that engage them in prayer and reflection.

In addition to inviting young adults into adult faith formation, engaging them in the inter-generational experiences of the community is a powerful opportunity for ongoing conversion. Young adults can share their life experiences of God with younger members of the community, particularly teenagers who see those in their twenties and thirties as role models. Young adults also bring fresh perspectives on faith to the older generations. At the same time, young adult faith is enriched by the faith of children (some of whom are their own little ones) and the wisdom and fidelity of the elders.

These are just a few of the many possibilities for faith formation that churches can consider.

Conclusion

Faith formation of young adults must begin and end with Jesus Christ. Its purpose, like all faith formation, is intimacy and communion with Christ that leads to a life of discipleship. Therefore, it is always relational and leading outward.

The first decade of the twenty-first century has created unique challenges and unprecedented opportunities for fostering the faith development of young adults. It would be tragic if Christian churches wrote off this generation as impossible to reach. They are the leaders we need to take the Christian Church into the future. They hunger for a personal relationship with Christ, and they want to transform the world. Each church should ask itself what it can do to support young adults in fulfilling their call to a living relationship with Christ, as well as to holiness, community, and service.

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