

The Adolescent Reality

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*"O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your
might to all the generations to come."*

—Psalm 71:17-18

The powerful testimonies of authentic adolescents who sit in our pews echo the unconditional trust expressed by Psalm 71. They bring joy into the church and help us look at the mysteries of life with awe. God has called us to accompany young people on the adventures of faith and life. As we offer prayers for protection and help for our young people throughout this journey, let us walk with them, proclaiming the hope in a God that is never far away.

"First, we are competent and want to be pushed. Give us responsibility; let us grow. Second, we are not the 'lost generation,' consumed only by ourselves. We are, though, different."

—Mitchell, nineteen years old
Salt Lake City, Utah
(from a church of about 500 members)

"Youth today are all different; there isn't one way you can sum us up. We are growing, and becoming, and different and unique. Adults need to understand that we have ideas we want to get out to the world. We're a strong generation that's trying to make a difference."

—Elli, fourteen years old
Asheville, North Carolina
(from a church of about 800 members)

"I think the only thing you need to know when you are coming along with the youth is keep an open mind and be yourself."

—Thelmisha, eighteen years old,
Florida (seeking a church home)

"We get bored if it is just people talking about things for a long time. We spend a lot of time thinking about food and sports. Technology means different things to us than it does to adults. We still need your time and presence, even when we say we don't."

—Elliott, almost thirteen years old
Boise, Idaho
(from a church of about 200 members)

"Youth in general are pushed to the edge more than ever. We are sleep deprived and overworked. Still, we find time to be creative and build community because that is what matters."

—Crosby, eighteen years old
Charlotte, North Carolina
(from a church of about 1,800 members)

The young people of our church remind us of God's grace and power. Beginning about age ten and culminating with full brain development during young adulthood, young people experience dramatic and perplexing changes. Like the psalmist, young people face these challenges with hope.

Adolescence offers young people opportunities for identity formation and personal exploration. Teens explore their emerging relationship to the adult world around them. As they seek to understand the world, their reflection can be thoughtful, articulate, cynical, and dramatic. Young people have deep, profound questions for God, for their peers, and for anyone who will listen.

Brain Development

We stand in awe of our young people because their brains are increasingly capable of creative reasoning. Living in their emotional brains, they are able to respond to the holy in all of life with spontaneity and deep hope. There have been astounding discoveries regarding adolescent brain development during the past decade. The adolescent brain makes billions of neural connections, a rate of change also seen in the preschooler's brain.

Brain reconstruction of the prefrontal cortex or reasoning center begins around puberty. Almost half of the existing synapses, or brain cell connections, are whittled away in this critical area as new connections are being rewired. The brain is ramping up to become faster and more efficient.¹ Like a young child learning to walk, the adolescent approaches the challenges related to reasoning and logic with halting steps; this makes it difficult for youth to plan ahead, resist impulses, and anticipate consequences to their actions.

Miller, seventeen, agreed on a whim to abandon her clothes and go streaking in the middle of the night. Sitting in the police station, she realized there had been no real decision-making process; she just wanted to do it. One afternoon, Jake grabbed onto the back of a truck while on his skateboard to get a faster ride into town. When the unsuspecting truck driver stopped abruptly, Jake lost his balance, fell off his board, and ended up in the hospital. Mary Katherine accepted the friend request of a guy she met on Facebook and began texting him almost daily. She soon found out the guy was forty-three (instead of sixteen as he originally claimed), but she agreed to meet him anyway to find out exactly what was going on. These adolescents represent many others who have an irresistible urge and respond impulsively.

Understanding brain development explains why adolescents are quick to try new things and forge into the unknown; it also reminds us of the importance of our role in guiding them on the adventure. Young people need to be in healthy, safe relationships with responsible, understanding adults who model Christ's unconditional love and help them discover what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in their specific context and in the world. Adults must be willing to help young people make faithful decisions and must be able to forgive them when they fall short in the decision-making process.

1. Kastner, Laura S., and Jennifer Wyatt, *Getting to Calm* (Seattle: ParentMap, 2009), p. 18.

Technology

Technologically proficient, young people are effortlessly plugged in to the grid. They have developed complex communication and social skills. They are accustomed to high-speed stimulation and instant response. Young people are growing up in a society infused with technology, connected globally, and rapidly evolving.

No one is surprised that 95 percent of our youth are connected on a daily basis to the Internet.² Their smartphones keep them connected twenty-four hours a day. Caroline, an honor student and youth council president, says that even at night she sleeps with her phone in hand under her pillow. According to a recent Nielsen report, U.S. teens on average send and receive over 3,000 texts per month. That's about 100 texts a day!³

How do we journey with young people through this digital world—especially when we understand that their logical brains are still forming? At best, we fully embrace the young people as digital natives, recognizing that in many ways we adults are digital immigrants. We live with them in their technological world, challenging them to practice their faith in ways that generations before them could never have imagined. More than the church preaching about Internet safety, this is about the church taking the next step of having young people reflect with us what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ in the digital world.

In this moment in history, we may be witnessing our church as a true communion of saints. We are all connected, and our ability to have dialogue with one another has transcended more boundaries than any other period of the church's history.

Spiritual Development

How does one's identity as a person of faith take shape in our contemporary culture? We just might find ourselves in a new experience with Christ accompanied by adolescents who engage, dwell, and create a new church in this postmodern faith.

In 2008, the Search Institute found that over half of our youth said they are more spiritual than when they were younger. Seven out of ten say they have more of a sense of meaning and purpose. They have found this purpose by helping others, observing spiritual disciplines of adults in their life, and through their own religious involvement.⁴ However, this generation is the least religious of all generations.⁵ Our young people are living in a culture where it is not the norm to be actively involved in church, even if they are spiritual.

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2. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, *Teens, Kindness and Cruelty on Social Network Sites*, November 9, 2011, p. 15.
 3. Nielsen Wire, "The Rise of Smartphones, Apps and the Mobile Web," December 15, 2011. blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/report-the-rise-of-smartphones-apps-and-the-mobile-web
 4. Search Institute, *With Their Own Voices: A Global Exploration of How Today's Young People Experience and Think About Spiritual Development*, November 5, 2008, p. 20.
 5. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active Than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional In Other Ways*, February 2010, p. 1.

Maria volunteers at the family shelter every Sunday morning, preparing lunch for 300 guests. She responds to God's love by serving the needs of her community even though it means she never worships at her church. On Sunday morning, Mark was supposed to go to the regional meet with his swim team. It was also the Sunday when the third-graders from the local elementary school would be singing for worship and one of those would be Sanchez, whom Mark tutored every week. Mark chose to go to worship with Sanchez, but the parents of his teammates asked that he withdraw from the team. Instead of heading to church, Tonisha grabs her yoga mat and heads out the door. Twice a week, she will find herself in a prayerful meditation during her yoga class.

We can imagine that the writer of Psalm 71 grew up in a home with parents of contagious faith grounded in hope. Similarly, we accept God's call to walk with adolescents as we discover and experience God in rich and meaningful ways. We boldly embrace the hopes of the psalmist, knowing that they are the same hopes God has for this generation. Today's teens are ready for the journey. For example, many in this generation pray. In a world that seductively and socially demands their attention, 41percent of adolescents take time out of their day to enter a time of intentional prayer.⁶ This is significant. Members of this generation will be ever diligent in seeking God; let us proclaim to them the grace of God that we know to be more than amazing and the love of God that will never let us go.

6. Ibid., p. 2.