

Emerging Adulthood...somewhere in between an adolescent and an adult

Margaret is 22 and single, she is not too sure what to do after college but she has a strong desire to help people. In an online job search she stumbles on an ad for a long-term service program designed to help the poor and marginalized. An opportunity exists to move across the country from her “homeland” on the West Coast to the East Coast to work on behalf of the poor and live in community with other long term volunteers. She opts for an experience of community living and a work placement that’s personally satisfying. Her year confirms her call to work with the poor but she isn’t settled yet on life’s details.

“No parents are forcing me to go to church.” Matt is a Jesuit educated young adult from Rochester. He was involved on his high school’s retreat team and parish as an altar server and Eucharistic Minister. During his freshman year of college he said: “I really enjoy going to Mass at 10 pm because it’s a great way to end the day!” By his junior year, his college studies, work, friends, girlfriend, fraternity, travel and community service sometimes made it almost to impossible to fit in another scheduled event. He came to Mass when he could, but by all means wasn’t a regular. He’d never miss Ash Wednesday though!

There’s also Jonathan. He moved out of his parents’ house at the prime age of 18 and never moved back. During the four years of college, Jon moved in and out of university residence halls, apartments in run down neighborhoods, apartments with roommates, apartments without roommates, fraternity housing, car, hotel and even friends’ couches. This college student somehow made sense of all the coming and going in his life and was able to balance a meritorious diploma. Amidst the instability of life Jon was making it work.

The above scenarios are of real twenty somethings who are and have been engaged in the pursuit of higher education. Their stories highlight the experience of emerging adults.

Psychologists and sociologists have been noticing cultural trends within the industrialized world over the past decade among those ages 18 to 25. Dr. Jeffery Arnett, a research professor of Psychology at Clark University, coined the term *emerging adult* in 2000 referring to the years between adolescence and adulthood.

What are the key characteristics of the *emerging adult*? According to Dr. Arnett’s theory there are five key areas that distinguish emerging adulthood from adolescence and adulthood found in *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties*. They are:

- Identity explorations
- Instability
- Self – focused
- Feeling in between

- Age of possibilities (8)

Who am I? Marriage and child-rearing are coming later in life for couples. Compared to fifty years ago, the statistics show an increase in the median age of both women and men when they get married. Post-secondary education is becoming more accessible. Not to mention that sexual exploration is more acceptable than years past.

Instability. Shifting choices in love and work make emerging adulthood very fluid. Boundaries, plans and personal discoveries are constantly shaping one's thinking and life plans. This is marked by college and job changes. Experimentation is a great descriptive word for this age.

Self-focused. Emerging adults are concentrating on their life experiences. This trait is not meant to be a pejorative term describing emerging adults. Their experiences are focused on building life. In fact, this generation is very generous with their time in service to humanity. They are shaped by hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti and now the Gulf Coast oil spill. They are willing to give time, money and creative energies to solve natural and man-made disasters.

Feeling in-between. Emerging adults are not adolescents and they are not fully settled adults either. They are between marriage, parenthood and a stable occupational path. Studies consistently show the following are the top three criteria for adulthood:

1. Accept responsibility for yourself
2. Make independent decisions.
3. Become financially independent.

(Arnett 15)

Hope. Emerging adults are optimistic and hopeful about their life and the world around them. This is where our faith and the values found in the society intersect. Our faith is full of hope and the person of Jesus Christ calls us into a relationship that is based on hope. One way to capture this hope is to be a consistent welcoming presence and celebrate with hope the many points of contact with emerging adults for example: graduation from high school, college, wedding engagements, the Sacraments of Matrimony & Baptism, and funerals.

Possible challenges of emerging adults for faith communities include:

Commitment – emerging adults are resistant to commit to institutions, civic organizations and relationships. Freedom is an overriding virtue to be lived. Sometimes it's hard to get emerging adults to come to meetings, programs or Mass. Appeal to the short-term and specific nature of emerging adult's generosity like one time service gatherings or their felt needs like a resume writing clinic for high school and college graduates.

Time - Emerging adults are overworked, scheduled, and constantly stimulated by technology. Gathered strategies that meet these folks seize opportunities for Liturgy in the evening or even at night. College aged student's schedules allow them to work, sleep in and go to Mass at "Last Chance Masses" after 5 pm. Don't forget about opportunities for community service on weekends and evenings that may accommodate emerging adults' schedules.

Independence – They are adults! Don't forget they are no longer children. Ask their input and give emerging adults tasks that capture their imagination, generosity and willingness to help.

Seeking – Emerging adults are seeking balance, truth, authenticity, knowledge of the faith and genuine mentors. They are working toward becoming self-sufficient and the tasks of adulthood. Allow questions that may challenge so that they may grasp their "faith seeking understanding." (St. Anselm)

Carpe Diem! Seize the Day! You can probably name some emerging adults from your community and notice some characteristics from above. Is this true to your experience? Remember that emerging adults are a complex group of people and that the cultural and socio-economic reality will influence the understanding of emerging adulthood.

Works cited & consulted

Arnett, Jeffery Jenson PhD. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.

Roberto, John. "Faith Formation with Emerging Adults: Congregational Practices." *Lifelong Faith: the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation*. 4.2 (2010): 45-56. Print.

Smith, Christian with Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

What resources are available to learn more about emerging adulthood?

Jeffrey Arnett Emerging Adult Website.

www.jeffreyarnett.com/index.htm

Changing SEA: The Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults.

www.changingsea.org

Confident. Connected. Open to Change. Millennials: A Portrait of Generations Next, Pew Research Center.

<http://pewresearch.org/millennials>

What kinds of ministry opportunities exist with emerging adults?

St. Gregory the Great Parish young adult ministry, Williamsville, NY
<http://www.stgregs.org/parish.php?pcode=yam>

Buffalo State Newman Center, Buffalo, NY
www.buffalostate.edu/orgs/newmanct/

Contemporary Roman Catholics (CRC)
Holy Trinity Church, New York City
www.crcnyc.org

St. Vincent de Paul Church, San Francisco, CA
www.svdpsf.org/youngadults

St. Alphonsus Liguori Parish, Chicago, IL
www.stalphonsuschgo.org/

St. Mary's Catholic Center at Texas A&M
www.aggiecatholic.org/

If you or your parish community would like to learn more about emerging adulthood or to strategize about ministry with young adults, please contact Greg Coogan at gcoogan@buffalodiocese.org or 716-847-8789.