

Dr. Denise Janssen
Assistant Professor of Christian Education
Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University
revdlj@att.net
2013 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 8-10

“Coming Back Home:

An ethnographic study of teenagers active in church-based youth ministries
and their pathways into active congregational life as emerging and young adults”

Abstract. This paper seeks to discuss the findings of an ethnographic research project studying church-active young adults who were also church-active adolescents and became reengaged in the life of local congregations. It analyzes their stories seeking to understand the reasons for their investment in congregations as adolescents and today, noting distinctives in their stories of adolescent experiences that increased the likelihood of meaningful adult investment in congregations. It explores periods of non-engagement in congregations often experienced by emerging and young adults. Finally, it seeks to offer insights for the Church through deeply listening to and analyzing the stories of young adults.

“Coming Back Home” details and analyzes an ethnographic study of teenagers active in church-based youth ministries and their pathways into active congregational life as emerging and young adults. Twelve church-active young adults who were church-active as adolescents were interviewed, seeking insight into church experiences that made it easier for these young adults to reconnect with a church. Interviews were recorded and analyzed through multiple phases of listening and note taking. Responses grouped into four areas: identity entanglements, still small grown-up voices and vocations, the sacramentality of real relationships, and faithful fallowness and the way back home. We will focus on these later in this paper.

The impetus for this research study was deeply personal. For many years, from 1987 – 2006, I served as a professional in the field of youth ministry in local congregations, at camps, and at the judicatory and denominational level. I still do, though my work is much broader these days. During those years, I encountered hundreds of passionate adolescents who loved God and earnestly sought to live into the emerging vocations to which they understood God was calling them. I was privileged to be a companion on their journey, with some for just a little while, and with others for a while longer. I saw in these youth the emerging shoots of the grown-ups they were becoming, full of grace and hope.

In most cases, they moved on to colleges far away, and I followed their continuing journeys with great interest, although often from afar. In every case where they would permit it, I would offer introductions to colleagues in the area and congregations with which they could connect. Sometimes the distractions of college life or the allure of new freedoms got in the way of connecting with a congregation during college. Sometimes hurtful or careless interactions with congregations and ministries were to blame. More often, sometimes years later, I heard from these grown-up youth that they had grown hardened against the possibility that the God of their youth even existed. But these were youth whose lives I had shared deeply for a time. I had

heard them give voice to their faith commitments. I had heard them and watched them live their faith in prophetic ways. I could not help my skepticism that their professed agnosticism was a cover. My deepest hunches, or maybe fears, told me something went wrong during their adolescent years or after that kept them from living as faithful disciples of Jesus in the grown-up world in the ways I had observed during their adolescence. A desire to create more effective youth ministry that better prepared adolescents for the transition to adulthood was the first impetus for this study. “Where have all the flowers gone . . .,”¹ I asked with deep sadness about those emerging adults. “And why?”

Every Christian denomination finds itself today wondering: “Where have all the young adults gone? Why don’t they come to church?” Merely observing the ages of those present in a typical mainline Protestant worship service affirms the reality that young adults are present in worship and active in congregations at a far lower percentage of the congregation than most other adult age groups. Their rate of participation is far lower than the percentage of people in their age-range in the general population. If we look deeper for emerging and young adults active in leadership in congregations, we find even fewer.²

Speculation abounds regarding the reasons for this observed phenomenon. It often takes the form of judgment and blaming: “If the park district wouldn’t schedule soccer on Sundays, those young families would be in church.” Many middle and older adults remember becoming involved with a congregation as young adults with their children, and that there were many other young adults involved in the congregation they joined. “So what’s with this current generation?” they ask. “Why aren’t they coming to church?” Quietly amongst themselves, older members often ask a far more practical question about where the energetic, able-bodied members will come from who will take over from them the work in the church that they have continued doing far past their interest and physical ability to do it.

Well-meaning congregations renovate their nurseries and remove the pews from their sanctuaries. They hope to attract young adults is with “contemporary worship” – ostensibly the traditional worship service re-packaged with praise and worship music from the 70s played on guitars and keyboards. Some try contemplative services with “smells and bells” because the literature says “it’s what the young people today are looking for.” Coffee shops and casual dress, as well projected lyrics and ‘relevant’ preaching attempt to draw young adults. Parenting programs, including “mother’s day out” style programs seek to do the same. Worship services at alternative times and in alternative locations were a popular strategy for a while. These strategies mostly missed the mark, sometimes drawing older Baby Boomers, but not the current young adult generation. Each of these strategies – and dozens more like them – has failed far more often than they succeeded, taking as evidence the ongoing absence of young adults from congregational life.

The complicated and evolving period of transition from adolescence through emerging adulthood and into young adulthood – and, in particular, the meaning-making or faith aspects of this transition – creates the space and material for this research. In asking the foundational

¹ Pete Seeger, “Where have all the flowers gone?” Fall River Music, 1961.

² My observation about young adults’ absence from congregational life is corroborated by Arnett’s research with emerging adults in which 58% of emerging adults surveyed said religious beliefs were “very important” or “quite important,” yet those same emerging adults identified at a rate of 65% that attendance at religious services was only “somewhat important” or “not at all important” to them. Nearly half reported that they attend religious services “about 1-2 times a year or less.” Cf. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: the Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

question of the research – “What experiences from adolescence make it more likely for a young adult to be actively engaged in a faith community?” – I mean to hold up a mirror to local congregations. There are new insights to be gained from listening deeply to the narratives of the lives of a handful of faithful young adults who are engaged and living out their Christian vocations in and through the local church. In hearing their stories and experiences, and reflecting together on how they have made meaning of those experiences, I hope to offer some food for thought to share with progressive mainline congregations, particularly those in the upper Midwest United States where this research was conducted, as they seek to understand something of the faith lives of young adults in their midst.

To set the stage for the place of faith in emerging and young adulthood, I turned first to research into the faith lives of adolescents. The large scale National Study of Youth and Religion, a quantitative study with a qualitative component undertaken several years ago attempted to get at the religious lives and thinking of youth, and provides a good starting point for asking these questions. This study, detailed in the book, *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, found that 44% of teens attend church weekly and another 16% attend religious services two to three times a month. They would attend more often if it was entirely up to them: 47% and 20% respectively. What the study indicates, based on these percentages, is that more than half of mainline Protestant teens are in church more than half the time.³

Smith and Denton further observed that, while adolescents may intend to be more involved in congregations, they are inarticulate about what they believe.⁴ In *Soul Searching* and later works, the beliefs of study participants are characterized using the term “moralistic therapeutic deism.” Essentially, this term refers roughly to the following set of beliefs: a Creator God exists who gives order to the world and watches over humans, and that God wants people to be nice to each other, be happy, and have good self-esteem. God doesn’t necessarily get involved in the everyday lives of most people except as a problem solver. In addition, all good people go to heaven when they die. This set of beliefs, Smith and Denton observe, seems to be the tacit creed of the majority of the teens they interviewed.⁵ In the face of these results I wonder: how are the youth surveyed formed by the services they attend, however often they attend them? What is the content of the faith they claim, and how does it affect them? The study found that half of mainline Protestants surveyed said faith was very or extremely important. For faith to be as important to them as those surveyed report, it is striking that the authors report that most youth were incredibly inarticulate about their faith.

The survey seems to suggest that mainline Protestant congregations do a less than adequate job of helping adolescents know and experience the God in whom they claim to believe. They also fall short of helping youth experience and know a sophisticated and complex God who can grow and change as they grow and change. The absence of young adults from communities of faith raises real questions about the adequacy of the God the church is teaching.⁶

“Then what happens when these youth get to be young adults? Why aren’t we seeing them in church?” would be the likely response of people in the pews of many mainline Protestant

³ Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Even allowing that “being articulate” isn’t the only or best measure of having faith, the study still seems to indicate that youth aren’t getting much help from the churches they attend more than half the time in knowing how to express or live out the faith that they say is so important to them.

⁵ Smith and Denton, 164-65.

⁶ Smith and Denton, 166.

congregations. Barna research cited in *The Christian Century* suggests that faith is still important to young adults: 80% say faith is very important, three-quarters claim to have prayed in the last week, and nearly 60% claim to have made a personal commitment to Jesus. They just don't attend church regularly: just 30% say they've attended church in the last week – the same percentage as have donated anything to a church in the last year or read the Bible in the last week.⁷ These findings aren't limited to one end or the other of the theological spectrum.⁸

This is further elucidated in Jeffery Jensen Arnett's research which identifies that attendance at religious services as a child or adolescent seems to have very little impact on the lives of faith of emerging adults. One emerging adult described the challenge to her faith that came during a college class in theology when her eyes were opened to the critical academic study of religion instead of the more devotional and dogmatic faith she was taught in church: “. . . I'm going, 'Wait a minute. These Catholics have lied to me my whole life.'”⁹ This response and others like it make me wonder about the content and quality of the religious education these emerging adults received as children and youth. The young female study participant's response makes me wonder: if we could hear about the faith this emerging adult respondent is rejecting, perhaps we would affirm that we don't believe in that God either.

Arnett identifies the emerging adult urge to make decisions for themselves as another reason for the minimal role of congregations in the faith lives of emerging adults. “. . . to accept what their parents have taught them about religion and carry on the same religious traditions as their parents would represent a kind of failure, an abdication of their responsibility to think for themselves, become independent from their parents, and decide on their own beliefs.”¹⁰ He observes from survey and interview responses that this “rugged individualism” softens when emerging adults become parents – it seems they are more likely to be motivated by their children than their parents to adopt a religious tradition and practice within it.

Through analysis of my interviews with church-active young adults who were church-active in their adolescence, I found coalescence in their responses around four areas: (1) identity entanglements, (2) still small grown-up voices and vocations, (3) the sacramentality of real relationships, and (4) faithful fallowness and the way back home.

In speaking of identity entanglements, I mean to indicate something that goes beyond the role faith typically plays in the identity formation of an adolescent. Entanglement is the term I choose to reflect a deep sense of comingling of identity, something that is not easily separated or sorted out. I recognize that this term can carry with it some negative connotations in some contexts; however, I have chosen to reclaim the word because it is uniquely descriptive of what I found present in some very healthy ways in this study. The word describes an interconnectedness, an “all-in-ness”, that is difficult to capture with other terms that could be

⁷ Then what happens when these youth get to be young adults? Why aren't we seeing them in church? That would be the likely response of people in the pews of many mainline Protestant congregations. Barna research cited in *The Christian Century* suggests that faith is still important to young adults: 80% say faith is very important, three-quarters claim to have prayed in the last week, and nearly 60% claim to have made a personal commitment to Jesus. They just don't attend church regularly: just 30% say they've attended church in the last week – the same percentage as have donated anything to a church in the last year or read the Bible in the last week. Cf. Kristen Campbell, “Young Adults Missing from Pews,” *The Christian Century*, 121:3 (February 10, 2004), 16.

⁸ These findings aren't limited to one end or the other of the theological spectrum. If *The Christian Century* represents a more liberal-leaning perspective, then for a more evangelical perspective, see Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus, But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

⁹ Arnett, 176.

¹⁰ Arnett, 177.

used to describe a deep intermingling of identity. Kenda Creasy Dean lifts up research from the National Study of Youth and Religion that observes “. . . participating in any identity-bearing community, religious or otherwise, improves young people’s likeliness to thrive.”¹¹ The findings of my study seem to reflect, with thick, rich description typical of ethnography, what other research has indicated.

In my conversation with Bill and others, I heard about what I came to term “still small grown-up voices and vocations.” Bill told about his adolescence as a battle with the unfairness he found in the prevailing culture, causing a bumpy ride through various counter-cultural expressions interspersed with escape through alcohol and other chemical means. He struggled with bouts of depression. Taking action on justice issues because of his faith had been an important part of his pre-adolescent years and he saw it as part of who he was. After the bumpiness of his adolescent years, Bill describes in this way the time when things inside him started to get sorted out: “I came home to myself then.” So central to his identity was the idea that people of faith work for justice that he reconnected with something essential about himself through intentional work for justice while he was still in the morass of floundering to form an identity.

As a result, Bill felt motivated to connect with other people of faith seeking justice. He wasn’t really looking for a church, but he knew that was a place to find others who cared about justice. He found his way to the first congregation of his young adulthood: a downtown congregation in the large Northwest U.S. city where he lived, a place where he became involved in justice ministries and volunteered with at-risk youth (like he had been). With a detour through a year of seminary to develop the tools he needed to think theologically and articulate his passions, eventually this preoccupation with justice helped Bill find his vocation as an attorney in advocacy and justice work.¹²

The story above from my interview with Bill illustrates the central place vocation formation can take as adolescents seek to assemble an identity and how vocation can provide a landmark in the midst of their young adult remaking of meaning. Finding voice and vocation plays an important role in the lives of adolescents as they mature. Adolescents are ‘trying on’ identities in their search for one that fits. Most youth have not yet claimed their voice or inner authority, yet this is typical developmental work that begins to take place during adolescence.¹³ The church potentially in some cases, but regretfully in others, provides the content for the shaping of a vocation. These church-active youth saw how the church, even with all of its foibles, continued to provide a sense of meaning and direction.

Brian Mahan, in his book, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition*, describes vocation as the thing that runs counter to simple ambition as a person forms a sense of what they are uniquely gifted to do in the world. Mahan notes that while the most common life script says if you get into Yale Law School, then you go to Yale Law, there are alternative scripts for life that allow for one’s sense of call to override ambition. The counter scripts value connecting one’s deepest passions with one’s gifts and observing the response

¹¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20.

¹² Interview recording with Bill, March 27, 2009, between minutes 28 and 29.

¹³ Mary Field Belenky, Bythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 54.

within oneself. Vocation, according to Mahan, “is less about discovering our occupation than about uncovering our preoccupations.”¹⁴

Kenda Creasy Dean, in her book *Practicing Passion*, puts it another way: “Adolescents are searching for something, for someone, ‘to die for,’ to use Erik Erikson’s haunting phrase: a cause worthy of their suffering, a love worthy of a lifetime”¹⁵ In my study, I heard young adults reflect on the powerful effect it had on them to realize that God needed them to do something in the world. I wouldn’t characterize what I saw as something ‘to die for’ though – to me it seemed more accurate to say they were yearning for something to live for, something worthy of the investment of their lives.

A third coalescence I heard from participants was around an idea I came to call the sacramentality of real relationships. In my interviews with research participants, I was struck by the number of times, having asked about church people who had been important to them when they were teenagers, I heard stories of unnamed faithful grown-ups who companioned these youth or simply offered consistent presence in their lives as they grew in faith. Even more interesting to me was that these stories of faithful companions and ‘presencers’ continued as study participants described the churches of their young adulthood. This represented a significant continuing factor between the two periods and became something to which I paid close attention.

In their book, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on their Vocational Quests*, Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer describe a posture critical for ministry: companioning. In their book, it has to do primarily with ministry with adolescents, but I find that it applies more broadly to ministry in other periods of life. Companioning has to do with more than just “being there” and sharing the stuff of life, but rather involves intentionally journeying together, being on the move, going somewhere on purpose.¹⁶

Finally, I found that I heard again and again in my interviews about the periods when participants were not active in churches, a time in which I heard incredible faithfulness in the midst of what seemed like fallowness. Some chose this time away while others were de-churched as the congregations they had chosen changed in ways untenable to them, and vice versa. While it might seem to some that this time away from church represented a period of decreased spirituality and faithfulness, I heard in their stories a deep and genuine faith in a God with whom they were in relationship all along. This may have been a fallow period for them in terms of active participation in a congregation, but it represented in several cases a period of growth that produced a more honest and richly textured spirituality. There was, indeed, faithfulness in the fallow time.

These findings led to three key recommendations for Christian education and youth ministry. First, the church needs to pay attention to nurturing faith at every life stage. Since this research suggests that the faith of youth is strengthened by the presence of genuine, faithful grown-ups journeying with them, practices that deepen faith across the life cycle are important. Church folks may be tempted to ask, “Faithful following? What does it really matter anyway?” This study seems to offer a response worth paying attention to.

¹⁴ Mahan, 183.

¹⁵ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 2. She quotes Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 233.

¹⁶ Baker and Mercer, 19-20.

Second, youth need journey partners who engage and model the lifelong work of meaning making and vocational discernment, who take seriously their partnership with God on behalf of neighbors. In short, youth ministry must go beyond silly games, thin theology, and serving soup. Finally, the church must create hospitable space for successive generations, recognizing the organic and adaptive nature of the body of Christ. Rather than reject them back when they seem to be rejecting the church by attending sporadically or staying away, I share this challenge: resist the temptation to ‘reject them back’ when you feel rejected by them. To congregations concerned about young adults, I offer: do unto *young adults* as you would have them do unto you.

Epilogue

I offer these words of epilogue as a reminder that we share this journey of faith, young and not-so-young, and that we need one another across the vast and diverse spectrum of creation in order have of hope of understanding what it means to be in the image of God.

*Teach your children well, their father's hell did slowly go by.
And feed them on your dreams; the one they pick's the one you'll know by . . .*

*And you, of tender years, can't know the fears that your elders grew by.
And so please help them with your youth; they seek the truth before they can die . . .*

*Teach your parents well, their children's hell will slowly go by.
And feed them on your dreams; the one they pick's the one you'll know by . . .*

*Don't you ever ask them why; if they told you, you would cry.
So just look at them and sigh, and know they love you.¹⁷*

¹⁷ Graham Nash, Nash Notes, “Teach Your Children Well,” recorded by Crosby, Stills, Nash, Young, *4 Way Street*, 2002.

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