

## Relationships and Emerging Adults

Relationships rank high in the minds of emerging adults (22 to 30 year-olds) but maybe not in the way you think. The terminology in use reveals something. "Hanging out" is one term. It reflects that modern relationships have the feel of fluidity, not loyalty, casualness, not commitment.

Emerging adults express a desire for secure, lasting relationships but few have much experience of it. Parents divorce. Roommates change. Lovers leave. Siblings move away. It's a mobile world.

Emerging adults often have many Facebook friends who know the kinds of things normally reserved for one's closest friends. Few have many reliable, face to face friends. It may be "all about relationships" but do they work?

All quotes in this month's newsletter come from the book, *Souls in Transition*, by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell. Oxford University Press 2009.

## Morphing to the Amorphous

### Defining the Relationship

Old labels like *just friends*, *dating*, *courtship* and *engaged* are too defined for the emerging adult reality. The line between friend and boyfriend is blurred by *making out* with him at a party but not ever dating him. *Going out* may not be exclusively with one person and may not involve actually going out. You just hang out together a lot. Those who live together sexually during the school year might never actually date and they might hook up with someone else just for the summer.

The tendency toward nebulous relationships has generated what some call the DTR talk –defining the relationship. Females want this

more than males but don't seem very empowered to demand anything. So, they often settle for amorphous relationships and try to be OK with it all.

In the meantime hard breakups are common. Some victims of relationship failure decide they can't rely on anyone, become self-concerned, and just look out for themselves. They never want to risk getting hurt again. Others risk everything. "You hope for the best, prepare for some of the worst, enjoy yourself and deal with the fallout if and when you get unlucky." (p.41)

### Settling Down

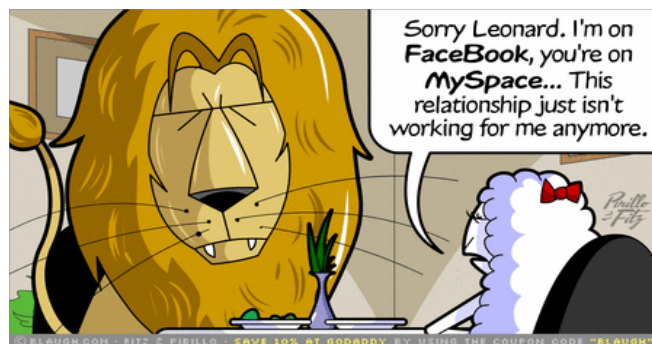
Most emerging adults still want marriage with a lifelong commitment. They dream of it and are optimistic that it will happen someday, but they "see little

connection between the lives they live now before settling down, and the lives they will live later after having settled down. ...They can party, hook up with strangers, and

generally play at being wild. Later, when they settle down, they'll be sober, faithful, responsible adults. The assumption seems to be 'whatever happens in my early twenties stays in my early twenties.'" (p.57)



In the words of one interviewee: "People my age don't have it figured out like they used to... I don't know what there is for me yet. But I'm not worried about it either." (p.53)



**Correction:** The last milestone in the January newsletter should have been "achieved financial independence" not "owning a house." Although purchasing a house became more difficult in the 80s and early 90s, with the price crash and low interest rates it is easier now.

## Emerging Adult Relationships with Parents

Emerging adults almost all say their relationship with their parents is one of the most important things to them. That is helpful for parents to know, especially for parents who are tempted to compromise their standards for fear of losing their relationship with their children. Some parents feel they are in a bind they aren't actually in. They see signs that their children are challenging the boundaries. However, the signs being given off aren't necessarily accurate. "Very few emerging adults want to drastically break their ties with their parents. If anything, they actually want to improve their relationship with their parents... but they want that on a renegotiated ground." (p.78) If it is negotiable, they will very likely negotiate! However, "when parents are seriously religious, want their children to be seriously religious, and have raised them to be so, the emerging adults' desire to have a good connection with their parents tends to encourage them to continue to affirm and practice their religious faith, even



if perhaps in a less intense way. In such cases, to reject the religious faith of one's seriously religious parents... would be symbolically and substantively to damage that relationship." (p. 85-86)

In other words, if parents make their children's moral and religious practice something that clearly defines whether their children are in a good relationship with them, their children are much more likely to uphold the same values. Violating what has been defined as important threatens the relationship.

This isn't the whole of what is necessary to raise children who are radical disciples, but it is part.

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## The Four "R's"

"Religion is not made for young people. Look at the entertainment aspect – even education, the average elementary school all the way through college, it's so oriented around movies, video games, entertainment, fun books -- why on earth would young people go to church if it doesn't offer anything personal as a reward, especially when church just tells them what they're doing wrong? Why would we go? To youth, it's boring." (p.31)

Many youth workers will read such a statement and come to the wrong conclusion: the church needs to increase the entertainment value of its programs to reach youth.

The analysis of what actually gets young people involved, and keeps them involved, does not show entertainment to be a very significant factor. The most significant factor is having parents who are serious about their faith and pass that seriousness on to their children.

A second significant factor is "having more adults in a religious congregation to whom they can turn for support, advice and help." (p.233) Youth workers are often the adults youth will turn to, but

there is also great value in transgenerational relationships. "Real adults" can do things youth workers cannot.

So, the first factor is relationship. The second factor is relationship. The third factor (you can see it coming) is relationship. Youth who have a living relationship with the Lord, manifested in devotional practices, especially personal prayer and reading of scripture (p.234) become faithful adults. Although most youth workers



would find *conversion experiences* critical as well, such experiences make little long-term difference if youth have no daily-manifested relationship with the Lord.

There is a fourth relationship factor: the peer relationship. The right peers encourage the right behavior. Those who believe, support those who believe. Those who don't, don't.

Good youth work puts its main emphasis on the four R's, not entertainment.

