

Promise and Possibility: The Movement of the Spirit through Gen Z

A Four-Session Study

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Introduction

A common quote often heard about 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, is that “Christians (and the church) should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” We have tried to do that in this curriculum, inviting participants to put into dialogue both scripture and current trends about emerging adults, commonly referred to as Generation Z (or Gen Z). We hope that everyone who uses this curriculum will come to better understand the context of collegiate ministry, and be inspired to connect with and support young adults and ministries who work with them.

In the gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph lose Jesus for a few days, eventually finding him back in the temple in Jerusalem. Scripture tells us, **“they found him...sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”** The chapter ends with verse 52, **“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.”** (Luke 2:46–47 and 52, NRSV)

We, too, want young adults to mature in body and spirit, to become wise and discerning followers of Jesus. For this growth to happen, they need teachers to walk with them on their journey to adulthood. Like Jesus, college students want those who are further along the spiritual journey to sit with them so they can ask their questions and listen to our honest answers. But it is not just a one-way engagement. Just like the teachers were amazed at Jesus’s understanding and answers, we, too, who accompany emerging adults will be amazed—by their passion, their questions, their pain, their stories, and their faith.

The larger church has an opportunity to impact the spiritual journeys of students who have been raised in the PC(USA) and those who have not by providing opportunities where they can experience and explore God's inclusive love and be empowered to live for the flourishing of all creation. My prayer is that this curriculum is used by the Holy Spirit to inform, inspire, and invite all who love and care about young adults to invest in ministries that support their spiritual formation during this pivotal time in their life.

Blessings on your journey!
Rev. Gini Norris-Lane
Executive Director
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Brief History of Collegiate Ministry in the PC(USA)

Presbyterians have a long history in the United States of educational mission. Beginning with the formation of Presbyterian seminaries and colleges in the 1700s, and expanding to ministry with young adults at state colleges and universities by the late 19th century, supporting the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional formation of young people for leadership in the church and the world is said to be the oldest mission beyond the congregation since Presbyterians came to this country.

In 2010, the 219th General Assembly of the PC(USA) voted for the denomination to have an Office of Collegiate Ministries. As that office became established, one of the first things the task force decided was to have a "brand name" by which all PC(USA) connected ministries will be known, so that when our youth go to college they will be able to more easily find a Presbyterian ministry and say, "There is my new spiritual home-away-from-home!" The name UKirk was created, which stands for University Kirk (the Scottish word for church). It is an invitation for the Church to take the gospel to a new generation of leaders for the church and the world.

Today, collegiate ministry is being carried out in numerous ways at both large and small state schools, Presbyterian-related colleges and universities, and private liberal-arts institutions and community colleges. These ministries are led by part-time and full-time campus ministers and can be organized as part of the ongoing mission of a congregation, as independent 501c3 organizations supported by donors, as ecumenical partnerships with one or more denominational partners, as a part of the ministry of a presbytery, or a combination thereof. Yet the truth is that ministry to and with college students is not just a ministry for a specific few; the whole church continues to be called to care for and nurture the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional lives of young adults.

Session 1

Loving God & Loving People: Living a Mission-Focused Life

This lesson seeks to help the whole church understand this generation of college students and young adults (commonly referred to as Gen Z) so that we can support and care for them spiritually, physically, intellectually, and emotionally during this season of their life.

If you have high school or college students who are connected to your congregation, invite them to share their insights about the information in today's lesson. Ask them to share their ideas and opinions about how your faith community can support and learn from their generation.

Invite

Memes are a hallmark of this generation of youth and young adults, and are [defined by Liam Ryer](#) as "images or videos sometimes overlaid with text to create a connection to a situation or feeling, reflective of the cultural zeitgeist." Emma Dowling, a high school student from Athens, GA, even wrote [an article](#) about it in 2020 for BluePrints, a student-led publication that is a collaboration between Cedar Shoals High School and WJAG-TV.

Ask participants to find and share memes they have seen in their social media feeds or from a search of Generation Z memes on the internet.

- What do you find funny (or sad)?
- Do you think previous generations had something equivalent?
- How do memes illustrate aspects about the humor, trends, and communication styles prevalent among emerging young adults?

Opening Prayer

Lord, we come before you today as a community seeking your guidance and wisdom in understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by the emerging generation of college students and young adults. We recognize that they navigate a world vastly different from the one we experienced during our own youth, filled with new technologies, shifting cultural landscapes, and evolving spiritual journeys.

Lord, we humbly ask for your divine insight and discernment as we seek to understand this generation. Open our hearts and minds to embrace their joys, fears, aspirations, and struggles. Help us to set aside preconceived notions and judgments, that we may approach emerging generations with compassion, empathy, and an eagerness to learn. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Grounding Scripture (Matthew 22:36–40, NRSV)

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” [37] He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ [38] This is the greatest and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ [40] On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Explore

Matthew 22:36–40 is a profound passage in which Jesus responds to a question posed by a Pharisee about the greatest commandment. This scripture encapsulates the essence of Jesus' teachings and provides a guiding principle for believers. In these verses, Jesus emphasizes the centrality of love—love for God and love for others. He quotes from the Old Testament, combining Deuteronomy 6:5 ("Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength") and Leviticus 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself"). By doing so, Jesus highlights the inseparable connection between our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with fellow human beings.

Jesus declares that these two commandments encompass the entirety of the Law and the Prophets. They serve as the foundation upon which all other commandments rest. Love becomes the lens through which we interpret and apply God's commands, guiding our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. In essence, Matthew 22:36–40 invites believers to embrace a love-centered life. It compels us to deepen our relationship with God, committing ourselves to God completely, while also inspiring us to cultivate a genuine and selfless love for others. As followers of Christ, we are called to embody and reflect the transformative power of love in our daily lives, both within our faith community and in the world at-large.

If any generation is positioned to do just that, it is the currently emerging generation of leaders, commonly referred to as [Generation Z](#) (or Gen Z). Even as the Pew Research Center has recently announced it will stop looking at data through a [generational lens](#), roughly speaking, Gen Z refers to individuals born

between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. As with generations before them, this generation is characterized by a unique set of qualities and experiences that distinguish them. According to recent studies conducted by the [Springtide Research Institute](#), Gen Z tends to be open to spirituality, very relational, and impact oriented. (You can sign up to receive and watch a video published on this topic by [World Vision and the Barna Group](#)) These three characteristics align well with the teachings of Jesus in the Matthew 22:36–40 passage.

Additionally, Gen Z stands out for their digital fluency, inclusive mindset, global perspective, social consciousness, and emphasis on personal expression. Regarding [digital fluency](#), they are the first generation to grow up in a digital era, surrounded by technology from an early age. As a result, Gen Z tends to be proficient in navigating the digital landscape, utilizing social media, and leveraging technology for communication, learning, and self-expression.

They tend to [embrace diversity and champion inclusivity](#). They are more likely to celebrate and respect differences in race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other social markers. In line with this principle, they value equality and social justice, actively advocating for inclusivity and combating discrimination. This is important because, more than any other generation, Gen Z has grown up in an interconnected world, exposed to global issues and events. They have constant access to diverse perspectives and information, which has shaped their worldview and given them a heightened awareness of global challenges such as climate change, poverty, and human rights.

Gen Z is socially conscious and actively engaged in social issues. They are passionate about causes such as [climate change](#), mental health awareness, gender equality, and racial justice. They use their voices to advocate for change and leverage social media as a platform for activism. Not only are they using their voices to help others, they are advocating for their own individuality, as they value self-expression and personal expression. This generation embraces personal identity, creativity, and authenticity. They seek platforms for self-discovery and are more likely to express themselves through personal branding, artistic endeavors, and unconventional career paths.

Understanding and engaging with these unique characteristics of Gen Z is essential for effectively connecting with and supporting them in the various domains of life. To effectively support Gen Z, congregations and other faith communities can cultivate genuine relationships with Gen Z members, offering mentorship and guidance in their spiritual journey. This means encouraging intergenerational connections that provide a sense of belonging and support. Churches and faith communities can provide intellectually stimulating and relevant teaching that integrates faith with contemporary issues, addressing their questions and concerns.

Because this generation is coming of age during a period of heightened anxiety and uncertainty, it is important that our faith communities work to create the kind of community where it's normal for Gen Z to openly discuss their doubts, fears, and struggles. It is also important for the church to offer resources and programs that address mental health and promote emotional well-being. To this end, you can provide access to professional counseling services, host workshops on stress management, and destigmatize conversations about mental health.

Furthermore, faith communities should encourage Gen Z's passion for social justice by providing opportunities for involvement in local and global initiatives. The church is uniquely positioned to help emerging adults understand that their involvement in working for a better world is not contrary to this Christian faith, but integral to Jesus' command to love God and our neighbors. This means listening to their perspectives on current issues, and helping them see possible theological and biblical connections. Finally, your faith community can support their desire to make a positive impact on society by fostering their sense of mission and purpose, even joining in their efforts if appropriate. By affirming their desire for social justice, you help them to live out the great commandment to love God and to love one's neighbor.

Gen Z brings forth unique spiritual, intellectual, and emotional characteristics that require intentional support from congregations. By recognizing their distinct traits and tailoring our approaches, we can create spaces where Gen Z feels valued, understood, and equipped to live out their faith with purpose and passion. Ultimately, these spaces can help them live mission-focused lives in which they practice loving God and loving their neighbors.

Discuss

1. In what ways do you see Gen Z embodying the characteristics of being spirituality open, relational, and impact-oriented?
2. Considering Gen Z's digital fluency and reliance on technology, how can we leverage these tools to deepen their spiritual journey and foster connection with God and others?
3. What strategies can churches employ to create a safe and supportive environment where Gen Z can openly discuss their doubts, fears, and aspirations regarding their future?
4. What are some practical ways we can cultivate intergenerational relationships within our faith communities to support and mentor Gen Z in their spiritual journey?

5. How can we effectively integrate the principles of loving God and loving others in our worship, teaching, and outreach efforts to resonate with the values and aspirations of Gen Z?

Reflect

1. What thoughts did this material spark in you? What were you reminded of or what did you learn from this lesson?
2. How will this insight shape how you pray for college students/young adults, campus ministries, parents and families of youth/young adults, college faculty and staff, your congregation, the larger church?
3. How are you or your group called to support or care for college students and/or those who minister to them?

Closing Prayer

Lord, we acknowledge that supporting and caring for emerging adults encompasses their spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being. May our congregation be a safe haven where they find solace, acceptance, and encouragement. Strengthen us as mentors, spiritual guides, and companions on their journeys of faith, reminding us that we are called to walk alongside them as they navigate the challenges of this pivotal season of life.

Guide us in creating spaces and opportunities within our church community where emerging adults feel seen, heard, and valued. Help us foster an environment that encourages their spiritual growth, where their doubts and questions are met with grace and understanding. Inspire us to develop relevant programs, initiatives, and resources that meet their needs and empower them to live out their faith in authentic and transformative ways.

We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, who journeys with us through all seasons of life. Amen.

Session 1 contributor is Lorenzo A. Watson, who currently serves as Interim CEO/President of the Christian Community Development Association, headquartered in Chicago, IL. Lorenzo earned an M.Div. degree from Shaw University Divinity School.

Session 2

Embracing Authenticity: Moving from Abstract to Concrete

This lesson seeks to help faith communities better understand and articulate issues facing young adults as they leave high school and go to college and/or into the world of work.

If you have high school or college students who are connected to your congregation, invite them to share their insights about the information in today's lesson. Ask them to share their ideas and opinions about how your faith community can support and learn from their generation.

Invite

Ask each participant to share their transition from high school to college, the military, or workforce. This could include challenges, fears, or exciting moments they encountered during this period. How do they think their transitional experiences were the same as today's young adults? Different? Here are 5 sample questions you can consider:

1. What was your go-to outfit or fashion trend when you first started college or work? Looking back, do you still cringe or embrace that style choice?
2. What was your dream job or career when you were in high school? Did it change as you entered the workforce, military, or college?
3. What do you remember about your early roommates or coworkers?
4. Can you identify a specific person or mentor who played a significant role in supporting you during your transition? How did their guidance impact you?
5. How did your faith play a role in guiding you through the challenges and decisions you faced during your transition out of high school?

Opening Prayer

Today, in the sanctuary of our hearts, we lift up the emerging generation of young adults, as they embark on their journey beyond high school into college and the workforce. We recognize the unique challenges, fears, and uncertainties that they face.

Lord, grant us open hearts and minds to genuinely understand the experiences and perspectives of these emerging adults. Help us to bridge the generational gap and create spaces where their voices are heard, valued, and respected. Give us the humility to listen attentively, without judgment or assumption, so that we may grasp the depths of their hopes, dreams, and struggles. We pray all this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who is our companion, helper and guide at every stage of life's journey, Amen.

Grounding Scripture (Romans 12:1–2, NRSV)

[1] I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Explore

Romans 12:1–2 is a powerful passage that highlights the transformative power of surrendering our lives to God and renewing our minds. These verses serve as a guide for believers on how to live a life pleasing to God.

In these verses, the apostle Paul encourages believers to respond to God's mercy by offering their bodies as living sacrifices. This act of surrender involves giving our entire selves, not just certain parts, to God. It signifies a willingness to live for God's purposes and to align our lives with God's will. Paul urges believers not to conform to the pattern of this world. Instead, they are called to be transformed. This transformation takes place through the renewing of our minds, which is a continual process of aligning our thoughts, attitudes, and perspectives with God's truth and wisdom. It involves letting go of worldly mindsets and embracing God's perspective.

When the concepts of Romans 12:1–2 are embraced, they can serve as a roadmap for helping emerging leaders from Gen Z live more fulfilling lives as they prepare for college and work. Church leaders can help Gen Z members to surrender their ambitions, fears, and uncertainties to God, trusting that God is working and will continue to work in their lives. Their faith connection with God's truth and wisdom can guide their decision-making and inform their relationships. This is important as this generation faces typical emerging adult stresses and stressors unique to their generation.

Similar to previous generations of young adults, Gen Z faces the pressure to make important life decisions at a young age. The transition from high school to college or work brings with it the weight of choosing a career path, deciding on a college major, or entering the workforce without a clear direction. This decision-making process can be overwhelming and anxiety-inducing for many young adults.

However, unique to Gen Z is their experience with the global pandemic during this formative time in their lives. Many schools and universities shifted to remote learning during the pandemic, causing significant disruptions in the educational journey of Gen Z. The transition to online classes and the lack of in-person interactions with peers and teachers have posed challenges in terms of learning effectiveness, socialization, and overall academic experience.

According to an [Annie E Casey Foundation](#) article, updated on February 14, 2023,

Members of Generation Z—individuals born between 1997 and 2012—are [growing up in an age of increased stress and anxiety](#). Some 70% of teens across all genders, races, and family-income levels say that anxiety and depression are significant problems among their peers, according to the [Pew Research Center](#)... Gen Z faces [chronic stress from many factors](#) including school shootings, student debt, joblessness and even politics. Technology plays a role, too. Growing up in a hyper-connected world can evoke intense feelings of isolation and loneliness in some youth. It can also fuel a steady drumbeat of negative news stories, a fear of missing out, and shame in falling short of a social media-worthy standard.

Youth and young adults often feel the need to showcase an idealized version of themselves on social media, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The constant exposure to curated online lives may also impact their mental health and self-esteem. Furthermore, Gen Z is confronted with societal challenges, such as increasing rates of mental health issues, social and political divisions, and the ongoing effects of climate change. These issues can leave them feeling uncertain about the future and questioning their place in the world.

Another issue Gen Z faces is the rising cost of education and the burden of student loan debt. Many young adults are forced to make financial decisions that can affect their long-term stability and hinder their ability to pursue their passions or callings. Financial stress can also impact their mental and emotional well-being.

By addressing the specific challenges faced by Gen Z and providing the necessary support, congregations can play a transformative role in helping young adults transition into college or work successfully. Through intentional

community-building, guidance, and faith integration, congregations can empower Gen Z to offer their entire selves to God, as highlighted in Romans 12:1–2. As a result, emerging adults will be able to navigate these critical life stages with resilience, purpose, and a strong foundation to their faith.

Discuss

1. How can the principles of surrendering our lives to God and renewing our minds, as outlined in Romans 12:1–2, help Gen Z navigate the challenges of making important life decisions and finding their purpose in college or work?
2. How can faith communities address the mental health challenges faced by Gen Z, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of social media?
3. How can churches address the financial challenges faced by Gen Z, such as rising education costs and student loan debt, and provide guidance on making wise financial decisions?
4. In what ways can churches and faith communities help Gen Z overcome the pressures of comparison and competition fueled by social media, and encourage them to embrace their unique identity and worth in Christ?
5. How can mentors and experienced members of the congregation provide authentic relationships for Gen Z members during major life decisions and transitions?

Respond

1. What thoughts did this material spark in you? What were you reminded of or what did you learn from this lesson?
2. How will this insight shape how you pray for college students/young adults, campus ministries, parents and families of youth/young adults, college faculty and staff, your congregation, the larger church?
3. How is your group called to support or care for college students and/or those who minister to them?

Closing Prayer

Empower us, O Lord, to hear the concerns and challenges of our young people, and then grant us the wisdom, empathy, and grace to walk beside them when they express anxieties about leaving the familiar and stepping

into the unknown. Guide us in supporting their aspirations for personal growth, independence, and purpose. May our congregation be a safe haven where young adults need a supportive community that embraces their uniqueness and nurtures their gifts.

Holy Spirit, awaken within us a deep empathy and compassion for the paths these young adults are about to embark upon. Help us understand the pressures they face, whether academic, social, or financial. Give us the wisdom to offer practical guidance and spiritual support that will sustain them as they navigate new environments and make significant life decisions.

We pray for strength and resilience for these young adults, knowing that the transition from high school to college or work can be overwhelming. Surround them with mentors, counselors, and friends who will walk alongside them, providing guidance and encouragement. May they discover their talents, passions, and purpose, embracing their role in shaping the future.

Lord, as a congregation, we commit to standing alongside our young adults, extending our support spiritually, emotionally, and practically. May our words and actions convey the love and grace of Christ, affirming their worth and potential. Help us create intentional spaces where they feel safe to share their joys and sorrows, knowing that they are not alone in their journey.

In the precious name of Jesus, who understands the depths of our hearts and walks with us through every season of life, we offer this prayer. Amen.

Program Ideas from Across the PC(USA)

In light of the challenges mentioned in this lesson, below are programs faith communities in the PC(USA) have implemented to support young adults:

1. Establish communities where Gen Z members feel accepted, valued, and supported by fostering an atmosphere of open dialogue, respect, and love, where all can freely express their doubts, fears, and aspirations.
2. Connect Gen Z with experienced mentors in your faith community who will listen with curiosity and share their own stories of navigating major life decisions.
3. Ask young adults to share their gifts and talents in all areas of the church.

Invite their leadership in worship, on the session or diaconate, or in ministry areas that align with their interests and passions.

4. Create ways for every age group in your community to share their own stories about growing up, overcoming difficulty, and exploring their faith with those younger than themselves. Often, when we hear how others who are a bit ahead of us on the journey of faith have overcome difficulty, we can begin to imagine how we can as well.
5. Learn to talk about the importance of mental health and create opportunities for open conversations about mental well-being. This can mean providing resources and referrals to professional counselors and therapists when needed.
6. Ask someone from the Financial Aid Office at a local college or university to do a seminar for parents, youth and young adults about how to pay for college. If your congregation is in a position to do so, consider offering scholarships or grants to members. Connect those who are going to college or seminary with the [PC\(USA\) Financial Aid for Service Office](#).

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Session 3

Campus Ministry for the Wider Church

This lesson will explore the underlying theological and biblical inspiration of collegiate ministry so that participants can better understand how ministry to and with young adults is connected to the life and ministry of the whole church.

If you have high school or college students who are connected to your congregation, invite them to share their insights about the information in today's lesson. Ask them to share their ideas and opinions about how your faith community can support and learn from their generation.

Invite

Ask participants to reflect and share insights on the following questions: If you grew up participating in the church (and, presumably are doing so today), was there ever a season in your life when you stopped participating? When was that season, and why, to your best recollection, did you stop?

Meet Three College Students [[SLIDES](#)]

How are the stories of your participants similar to the stories of the college students you just read? How are they different?

Opening Prayer

Great and holy Mystery, whose being we cannot comprehend, yet by whom we love and are loved: soften our spirits and open our minds that we may welcome with joy the new and sometimes bewildering ways your Spirit moves within the next generation as they grow, transform, and enrich Your Church. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Grounding Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:1–13, NRSV)

[1] When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you with superior speech or wisdom. [2] For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. [3] And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. [4] My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a

demonstration of the Spirit and of power, [5] so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. [6] Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are being destroyed. [7] But we speak God's wisdom, a hidden mystery, which God decreed before the ages for our glory [8] and which none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. [9] But, as it is written,

**“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—**

[10] God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. [11] For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. [12] Now we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. [13] And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Paul says in verse 12, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” These gifts are bestowed upon believers of every age, including youth and young adults. College is the time when young adults learn in deeper ways to discern the difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. Young adults between 18 and 23 are learning things not only through their coursework but also in co-curricular activities, leadership positions, internships and volunteer opportunities that significantly shape their worldview into adulthood. It is also a season when emerging adults explore more intentionally the gifts God has given and connect their skills, gifts, interests, abilities, personality, and faith with who they are becoming. This age often includes significant decisions about dating, marriage, majors, career choices, friendships, and family relationships. The church has an opportunity to stay in dialogue with students during this rich time of exploration and identity formation, shape opportunities and experiences, and have an impact upon future leaders in every area of society, the church, and the world.

Yet there is also a call for the church to receive and be formed by the wisdom of young adults. Paul's letter begins by establishing the premise of its argument: the gospel of Jesus Christ will almost always sound like foolishness to people in power (“the rulers of this age”). It is a great irony, then, how quickly people in power within the church are willing to dismiss the appeals of the younger generation as unrealistic naiveté or immaturity—foolishness. The invitation of this text is to consider with seriousness the wisdom God communicates to the church through its emerging generation of leaders—“a mystery that has been hidden, which God destined for our glory.”

Explore

Following is a brief exploration of several key theological and biblical approaches that can be helpful ways for the church to understand God's call to participate in and support ministry to and with this generation of emerging adults.

Campus Ministry as Fulfillment of Baptismal Vows

[2022 General Assembly Statistical Report](#) for the PC(USA).

Number of members Ages 18–25:

2019: 129,927

2022: 69,433

[18] And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18–20, NRSV)

The following promises are made to each person that is baptized in the PC(USA). (This baptismal liturgy is found on pp.408–409 in the Presbyterian [Book of Common Worship](#).):

Parent(s) of infants and younger children

Do you desire that N. [and N.] be baptized? I do.

Relying on God's grace, do you promise to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to your *child*? I do.

The presider addresses the sponsors, if any are present:

Will you, by your prayers and witness, help N. [and N.] to grow into the full stature of Christ? I will.

Additional questions may be asked of the children of the church (442–43).

The presider addresses the congregation:

Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture N. [and N.] by word and deed, with love and prayer? We do.

Will you encourage *her/him/them* to know and follow Christ and to be faithful *members* of his church? We will.

Presbyterians believe each individual congregation makes the promise to guide, nurture, encourage, pray for, and disciple the baptized on behalf of the whole church, not just the local community of faith. This promise to participate in the care and spiritual formation of a young person does not end when our young people graduate from high school and move on. Both individuals and communities of faith are called to continue to support their “homegrown” young people as they go to college, while also investing in ministries that provide for the care, support, and spiritual formation of emerging adults from other congregations. The fulfillment of the promise does not end, yet it does change.

Campus Ministry as Mission and Evangelism

In terms of identity, Generation Z is the least religious generation yet. More than one-third (34 percent) of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated, a significantly larger proportion than among Millennials (29 percent) and Generation X (25 percent). Fewer than one in five (18 percent) Baby Boomers and only 9 percent of the Silent Generation are religiously unaffiliated. [[LINK](#) —Survey Center on American Life]

There is evidence that those who were raised in a religious household are switching religious traditions at a higher rate based on patterns observed in recent decades, through 2019. For example, we [Pew Research] estimate that 31% of people raised Christian become unaffiliated between ages 15 to 29, the tumultuous period in which religious switching is concentrated. [[LINK](#) —Pew Research Center]

“The gospel—the content of Christian faith—is referred to by the Greek word *euangelion*, a form of which appears 130 times in the 27 books of the New Testament, and from which derives the English words evangel, evangelism, evangelical, etc.... In the gospel (the *euangelion*) according to Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news [euangeliozo] to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ (Luke 4:18-19, NRSV)

“In other words, [evangelism is] good news proclaimed to a particular people in the midst of their profound predicament. It is not ‘the spirit of the Lord has anointed me to convince you of certain metaphysical claims’; it is not ‘the spirit of the Lord has anointed me to promise you an afterlife in heaven, or threaten you with an afterlife in hell’; No, the purposes of Christ are—the *evangel* is—to bring good news to the poor; to liberate from oppression and captivity; to give new vision to those

who can imagine no other way but the present order of things.” (excerpts from sermon *The Gospel: An Emancipation Proclamation*)

I once preached a campus ministry sermon series at the Presbyterian Student Center at the University of Georgia titled *Euangelion: Taking Back the E-Word*. The primary goal of this series was to demonstrate that evangelism in its biblical sense is not about converting people to a set of beliefs about Jesus, but presenting and inviting people into an alternative and liberating way of being in the world with all our neighbors. The “mission field” in this sense includes sharing this good news with students who are not Christian, yet it is also inviting those who were raised Presbyterian and in other denominations into an alternative and liberating way of following Jesus and being in the world with all our neighbors.

In [1 Corinthians 11:17-26](#) “Paul doesn’t give corrective instruction, even in response to what is clearly callous, unchristian behavior. Corrective instruction does not generally transform hearts and minds, and that is what needs to happen if the world is to be made new. Instead, Paul tells the story of Jesus’ death—he proclaims the good news that divine liberation from oppression, and captivity, and failure of imagination has arrived, not as one more angry power to which we must genuflect, but as the embodiment of self-giving love ... and he proclaims it right into the middle of the sanctuary. Because if anybody needs to hear and believe the good news, and to alter our lives according to it, it is the church—it is we who claim to follow Jesus, and so often in our lives with our neighbors, forget or simply fail to do so.” (from the sermon *Christianity (Re-)Converted*)

Campus Ministry as Outreach and Pastoral Care

Just 45% of Gen Zers report that their mental health is very good or excellent, according to the American Psychological Association. All other generation groups fared better on this statistic, including Millennials (56%), Gen Xers (51%), and Boomers (70%). While Gen Z has been called the most depressed generation, members of this group are more likely than their older peers to seek out mental health counseling or therapy. Some 37% of Gen Zers—a higher rate than any previous generation—report having worked with a mental health professional. Still, access to care remains a problem. In 2019, for example, only 43% of youth ages 12 to 19 with a major depressive episode received mental health treatment. [[LINK](#) —Annie E. Casey Foundation]

[34] Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, [35] for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” [37] Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? [38] And when was it that we saw you a

stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? [39] And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" [40] And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:34–40, NRSV)

The definition of the word [outreach](#) is "to reach further than," and congregations and college ministries across the country understand that the [greatest commandment](#) to "love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves" calls us all to care for those within our communities of faith and those beyond our walls.

An integral part of the Christian faith is asking, How are we called to show love to our neighbor in ways that are meaningful to them physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, or economically? When people of faith demonstrate that following Christ includes tangible care for "the other," they are offering a witness to the world that God's love extends to all.

Campus Ministry is the Spiritual Formation of Emerging Leaders in an Increasingly Complex World

AI and ChatGPT are shaking the walls of higher education right now. *With ChatGPT, a student can turn in a passable assignment without reading a book, writing a word, or having a thought. But [reading and writing are essential to learning](#). They are also capacities we expect of college graduates. [\[LINK\]](#)*

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; [10] love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. [11] Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. [12] Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. (Romans 12:9–13, NRSV)

If this is your first introduction to ChatGPT, welcome to the new, AI-influenced world of higher education, with all of its moral, ethical, and spiritual quandaries. [\[LINK\]](#) See for yourself the just what ChatGPT-generated information can offer with just a few strokes of a keyboard:

- Brain development of 18–23 year olds, implications for behavioral habit formation, and recommended further reading [See Appendix 1 at the end of this session]
- Spiritual development of 18–23 year olds [See Appendix 2 at the end of this session]

In a world already filled with more moral, ethical, and spiritual quandaries to count, ChatGPT and AI are adding another layer of complexity to a world saturated by information and mis-information. Social media has increased humanity's ability to communicate with one another, but [loneliness](#) is now considered a public health crisis, especially to those ages 18 to 30.

The spiritual formation of young adults today takes greater intentionality, time, creativity, patience, and the ability both to listen and learn from young adults. The simultaneous development of college students' brains and the technological reality in which we all currently live and move makes spiritual development during this time much more complex as students grow to understand themselves, consider new ethical challenges, engage in vocational discernment, and relate to the world and people around them as adults. College students are bombarded by demands on their time and attention, yet also crave authentic communities of faith where they are invited to experience God's love, learn who Jesus is for them, and grow spiritually as they lead, serve, worship, study scripture, explore spiritual practices, care for each other, and advocate for a more just world.

Discuss

1. Accepting the obstacles presented to a congregation's baptismal vows when young members go away to college, discuss 3-4 simple, achievable goals for partnership with UKirk (locally and/or nationally) that would help maintain faithfulness to those vows with our members ages 18-23/26.
2. In light of the mental health statistics for members of Gen Z, what strategies should be employed by congregations to more effectively "hand-off" pastoral care to a local campus minister? (Even for students who never attend campus ministry programming, the knowledge of and familiarity with locally available pastoral care from a recognized tradition can make a tremendous difference.)
3. Though campus ministry has long included aspects of "the mission field," recent statistics on Gen Z and religious affiliation/switching bring the missional reality of campus ministry into starker relief. What steps can local congregations take to prepare faithfully and graciously to welcome campus ministry "converts" (students who do not fit the traditional Presbyterian mold, but who found a loving spiritual home in a Presbyterian campus ministry) when they graduate from college?
4. Considering the simultaneous development of college students' brains and the technological reality in which we all currently live and move, how might the church become a source of divine wisdom, grace, help, and comfort to students as they grow to understand themselves, consider new ethical challenges, engage in vocational discernment, and relate to the world and people around them as adults? What mechanisms do we have on hand already? What relational postures are most conducive to such aid (and which

postures become obstacles)? What do we currently lack that could be faithfully put in place for the sake of our young people's spiritual development?

Respond

1. Based on the information presented in this lesson and your group's discussion, what do you believe (or what have you heard) college students need and/or expect from the church in order to consider it a meaningful and worthwhile use of their time, energy, intellect, and imagination? Is it something that the church can faithfully provide? If so, what is your congregation doing to provide it to students? If not, what are the barriers preventing your church (or The Church) from doing so?
2. What is at stake in Gen Z's participation, or lack thereof, in the institutional church? What avenues of faithful Christian discipleship may emerge in the realization of a significant generational departure from church as we have known it? What may be lost?
3. What gifts has your church already received from its Gen Z members and/or what might our churches do better or more faithfully by observing, listening to, and learning from Gen Z?
4. What thoughts did this material spark in you? What were you reminded of or what did you learn from this lesson?
5. How will this insight shape how you pray for college students/young adults, campus ministries, parents and families of youth/young adults, college faculty and staff, your congregation, the larger church?

Closing Prayer

Loving God, inspire us with your love for this generation of young adults and help us to discover our call to love and care for your beloved ones. Guide us as we learn about the world through their eyes, and teach us as we seek to share the good news we have received in new ways. In the name of Jesus, who came to proclaim good news to all, Amen.

Session 3 contributor is Rev. Will Norman, Executive Campus Minister at the Presbyterian Student Center, University of Georgia.

Appendix 1

Q: What is happening in the brain development of 18–23 year olds?

ChatGPT

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The period between 18 and 23 years of age is a crucial time for brain development, as the brain continues to undergo significant changes and maturation during this stage. Here are some key aspects of brain development that occur in individuals within this age range:

1. **Prefrontal Cortex Development:** The prefrontal cortex, responsible for higher-order cognitive functions such as decision-making, impulse control, and planning, continues to develop during late adolescence and early adulthood. This area of the brain plays a crucial role in judgment, reasoning, and self-regulation.
2. **Myelination:** Myelination, the process of forming a protective covering (myelin sheath) around nerve fibers, continues during this period. Myelin helps to enhance the efficiency of neural communication, allowing for faster and more synchronized transmission of signals between different brain regions.
3. **Emotional Regulation:** The brain's emotional regulation systems continue to develop, particularly in the prefrontal cortex and limbic system. This development contributes to improved emotional regulation, impulse control, and the ability to modulate emotional responses.
4. **Cognitive Abilities:** Cognitive abilities such as critical thinking, abstract reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making continue to mature during this time. The brain's ability to process complex information and integrate different perspectives improves as neural connections are strengthened and refined.
5. **Risk-Taking Behavior:** The brain's reward and motivation systems, primarily driven by the release of dopamine, are particularly active during adolescence and early adulthood. This can make individuals more prone to engaging in risk-taking behaviors as they explore new experiences, seek novelty, and evaluate potential rewards.
6. **Peer Influence:** The social and emotional aspects of brain development are highly influenced by peer interactions during this stage. The brain's reward systems respond to social acceptance and peer feedback, which can shape decision-making and risk assessment.
7. **Consolidation of Identity:** Young adults in this age range often engage in self-discovery and identity formation. Brain development supports the exploration of personal values, beliefs, and life goals, allowing individuals to establish a more coherent sense of identity.

It's important to note that individual variations exist in brain development, and these general trends may not apply universally to every person within the age range of 18-23. Environmental factors, life experiences, and genetics also interact with brain development, contributing to individual differences in cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, and behavior.

Q: Does any of this have implications for the formation of behavioral habits?

ChatGPT

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Yes, the brain development that occurs during the late adolescence and early adulthood period can have implications for the formation of behavioral habits. Here are a few ways in which brain development influences habit formation during this stage:

1. **Plasticity and Neuroplasticity:** The brain exhibits a high degree of plasticity during late adolescence and early adulthood. This means that it is more adaptable and open to change, allowing for the formation of new behavioral habits. This period provides an opportunity for individuals to establish positive habits and engage in intentional behavior modification.
2. **Habit Formation:** The neural circuits involved in habit formation, such as the basal ganglia, are still developing during this stage. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, it means that negative or unhealthy habits can be easily established. On the other hand, it offers a window of opportunity for individuals to intentionally shape and cultivate positive habits that can have long-lasting effects on their well-being.
3. **Reinforcement and Reward Systems:** The brain's reward systems, which involve the release of dopamine, are highly active during this stage. Rewards play a crucial role in habit formation by reinforcing certain behaviors. Engaging in activities that provide a sense of reward or pleasure can strengthen the neural pathways associated with those behaviors, making them more likely to become habitual.
4. **Peer Influence:** Peer interactions and social contexts play a significant role in shaping behavioral habits during late adolescence and early adulthood. The brain's reward systems respond to social acceptance and feedback from peers. This can influence the adoption of certain habits or behaviors, whether positive or negative, as individuals seek social validation and belonging.
5. **Self-Reflection and Self-Directed Behavior:** As the prefrontal cortex continues to develop, individuals gain improved self-reflective abilities and enhanced executive functions. This allows for more intentional and self-directed behavior, enabling individuals to consciously choose and cultivate habits that align with their values and goals.

It's important to note that the formation of behavioral habits is a complex process influenced by various factors beyond brain development, including social, cultural, and environmental influences. Nevertheless, the dynamic brain changes occurring during late adolescence and early adulthood provide a critical window of opportunity for individuals to establish positive habits and engage in intentional behavior change.

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Q: What sources should I consult to learn more about this?

ChatGPT

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To learn more about the relationship between brain development and the formation of behavioral habits during late adolescence and early adulthood, you can consult a variety of reputable sources. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Scientific Journals:** Peer-reviewed scientific journals in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and developmental science are excellent sources for in-depth research and studies on brain development and behavioral habits. Some notable journals in these fields include "Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience," "NeuroImage," "Developmental Psychology," and "Journal of Youth and Adolescence."
2. **Books:** There are several books that explore the topic of brain development and behavior during adolescence and early adulthood. Some recommended titles include "The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults" by Frances E. Jensen and Amy Ellis Nutt, "The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids" by Barbara Strauch, and "The Changing Brain: Insights into Aging and the Adolescent Brain" by Sarah-Jayne Blakemore.
3. **Research Institutions and Organizations:** Academic and research institutions often publish articles, reports, and resources related to brain development and behavior in young adults. Examples include the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD).
4. **Online Databases:** Accessing online databases like PubMed, Google Scholar, or PsycINFO can help you find scholarly articles, research papers, and reviews on the subject. These databases allow you to search for specific keywords or topics related to brain development and behavioral habits during late adolescence and early adulthood.
5. **Educational Websites and Online Courses:** Websites and online platforms focused on neuroscience or psychology, such as Khan Academy, Coursera, or edX, may offer courses or educational resources that cover brain development and behavior during this age range.

Remember to critically evaluate the sources you consult, prioritize peer-reviewed research articles, and rely on information from reputable and trusted sources within the scientific community.

Appendix 2

Spiritual formation of 18–23 year olds

ChatGPT

The spiritual formation of 18–23 year olds is a critical phase of their development as young adults. During this period, individuals often experience significant changes in their beliefs, values, and identity. Spiritual formation refers to the process of nurturing and growing one's spiritual life and faith.

Here are some important considerations for the spiritual formation of young adults aged 18–23:

Encouraging Exploration: This age group is at a stage of life where they are questioning and exploring their beliefs. Encourage them to ask questions, seek answers, and explore various spiritual and philosophical perspectives. This exploration can lead to a deeper and more mature faith.

Relatable Mentorship: Young adults benefit from having mentors who can relate to their experiences and challenges. Mentors can provide guidance, share their own spiritual journeys, and be supportive without being judgmental.

Community and Fellowship: Creating a supportive and inclusive community where young adults can connect with peers who share their beliefs and values is crucial. This sense of belonging fosters spiritual growth and provides a safe space for sharing doubts and struggles.

Biblical and Theological Teaching: Provide solid biblical teaching and theological understanding, addressing relevant topics and issues that young adults face in their daily lives. Connecting faith to real-life situations helps them see the relevance of their spiritual beliefs.

Service and Outreach Opportunities: Engaging in service and outreach activities allows young adults to put their faith into action and make a positive impact on others and their community. This fosters a sense of purpose and a deeper connection to their faith.

Prayer and Reflection: Encourage regular times of prayer and reflection. Young adults can learn different forms of prayer and meditation to deepen their relationship with the divine and gain clarity on their spiritual journey.

Emotional and Mental Health Support: Acknowledge the emotional and mental health challenges that young adults may face during this transitional period. Providing resources and support for mental well-being is essential for their overall spiritual development.

Addressing Doubts and Questions: Create an environment where doubts and questions are welcome and discussed openly. Assure young adults that it's normal to have doubts, and it can lead to a stronger, more authentic faith.

Cultivate a Spirit of Worship: Help young adults explore different forms of worship, whether through music, art, or other expressions. Worship can be a powerful way to connect with the divine and foster a sense of awe and reverence.

Encourage Self-Reflection: Encourage young adults to regularly assess their spiritual growth and set personal goals for their faith journey. Self-reflection promotes intentionality in their spiritual formation.

Remember that each individual's spiritual journey is unique, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Flexibility, openness, and genuine care for the well-being of young adults are key components of effective spiritual formation during this critical stage of life.

Session 4

Faithful Accompaniment: Intentional Engagement with Four Stages of Faith Integration

This lesson invites us to lean into our trust that God's spirit is at work in the young people we love, even as they work to transform the embedded belief systems they inherited from their families and churches into a deliberative faith that they can own and find refuge in as they journey through adulthood.

If you have high school or college students who are connected to your congregation, invite them to share their insights about the information in today's lesson. Ask them to share their ideas and opinions about how your faith community can support and learn from their generation.

Invite

A college professor, who is also a parent and a pastor, was teaching a biblical studies course and discussing a reading on Millennials and faith with the students. The students expressed feeling like a spectacle in churches, where everyone clamors to find out how to best connect with them. One said, "You all raised us, why are we such a mystery to you?"

Ask participants to share their experiences with church after they graduated from high school. Have them share answers to questions such as these:

1. Did you belong to a faith community?
2. Did you feel included in the life of the community?
3. Were you interested in exploring questions of faith?
4. When you had doubts, who did you share your feelings or questions with?
5. Did you have a religious or spiritual upbringing? If so, is that the tradition you identify most with today?

The work of faith formation with young adults can sometimes be difficult for churches. We often struggle to gracefully navigate the developmental phase that begs for (if not demands) doubt and questioning, while we are simultaneously worried about the spiritual well-being of our emerging adults and the sustainability of our congregations.

Opening Prayer

Creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, we give thanks for your presence with us in all of the seasons of our faith and life. Help us to open our hearts and minds to learn something new in this hour, so that we might better live out our faith in the church and the world, and accompany one another more lovingly and faithfully. In the spirit of the living Christ, we pray. Amen.

Grounding Scriptures (Deut. 30:19b–20; Mark 3:31–35, CEB)

Deuteronomy 30:19b–20

[19b] I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live— [20] by loving the Lord your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That’s how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Mark 3:31–35

[31] His mother and brothers arrived. They stood outside and sent word to him, calling for him. [32] A crowd was seated around him, and those sent to him said, “Look, your mother, brothers, and sisters are outside looking for you.” [33] He replied, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” [34] Looking around at those seated around him in a circle, he said, “Look, here are my mother and my brothers. [35] Whoever does God’s will is my brother, sister, and mother.”

Explore

When a child is baptized in a Presbyterian church, the congregation makes their own baptismal vows to the child and the child’s family. Guidelines for this covenantal exchange include: “The congregation shall profess its faith, using the Apostles’ Creed, voice its support of the baptized, and express its willingness to take responsibility for the nurture of those baptized.”

(<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/faq/faq-baptism/>)

Church communities are often really good at caring for their children. They say it takes a village to raise a child and so many children have warm memories of the church families that gathered around them as they grew. At different times throughout their lives, the focus of the care shifted; sometimes the physical was at the forefront and sometimes it was the mental and emotional well-being that was

the priority. But at every age and stage, we are concerned with their spiritual well-being. That can be a growing challenge as children grow and develop their own identities and systems of belief and thought. Even so, we are called to continue in our nurture of youth and young adults in ways that provide roots and wings for their growth and flourishing.

Tim Clydesdale is a sociologist who has studied emerging adults and has tracked a group of them from their senior year of high school through their graduation from college. He notes that many young people feel like they're going it alone and struggle to engage the deep topics. One student interviewed in the book *The First Year Out* says "it was like God dropped me off at college and said 'I'll see you in four years.'" The subtext there may be: my church dropped me off at college and said the same thing. The changes experienced in this season of life create many opportunities for faithful accompaniment.

In the book *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, Katherine Turpin writes the following:

During the period after high school, there is an awakening to commitments and responsibilities normally assigned to adults. Developmental psychologist Sharon Parks speaks of the "post-adolescent quality" of "emerging strength" in this life period that requires appropriate mentoring in the realms of higher education, economy and workplace, politics, religion, and family ... The demands of vocation can be experienced as both gift and curse, as young adults struggle to launch their own life story of significance and purpose into the demands of social scripts that privilege economic success and romantic triumph...a central part of vocation in younger adulthood is the exploration of identity outside the structures provided by the family and context of origin.

Enter Jesus, in Mark chapter 3, who is a little older than our emerging adults, but has clearly gone through his own process of shifting from embedded to deliberative theology, and now understands his identity and belonging differently than he did as a child, as we all do.

So much about his identity has shifted that when the crowd begins to say to him, *Look, your mother, brothers, and sisters are outside looking for you. He replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?"* The wider context of the passage is that Jesus' family had come to fetch him because it seemed that he was out of his mind. (How often have we thought we needed to "fetch" or otherwise intervene in the lives of a young adult we know and love because their path didn't follow our prescribed plan for them?)

It seems clear that for Jesus to live into the fullness of his authentic identity, both human and divine, he had to go beyond the bounds of where his place in the family of origin, and even his faith community, could take him. As is often the case, at least with many emerging adults, in his becoming, he became more than his biological family and those closest to them could handle.

New Testament professor Matthew Skinner writes “Jesus redefines the criteria for who constitutes his true family. This goes beyond striking back at his mother and brothers' opinion about his sanity. More foundationally, Jesus makes a claim about what it might mean to belong to other people. He makes a claim about identity ... Jesus speaks to deeply embedded cultural assumptions when he determines his true family not by blood relations or kinship ties but by doing the will of God.”

It would seem that identity formation and faith development have always been concurrent processes—processes that continue throughout our lives at every age and stage. There are many seasons in people's lives when they might experience a crisis of faith or just experience a desire to connect in a new way with God and community.

The text from Deuteronomy offers a framework for faith development individually and communally. It reminds us so clearly of our ability and responsibility to choose and to keep choosing life, and it helps us remember that we are not the only people affected by our choices. *Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live—* Whether or not we are parents, if we have participated in baptismal vows or confirmation promises to young Christians, we have spiritual descendants. When we choose life for ourselves, we choose it for them as well. The text from Deuteronomy is like the icing on the cake of this speech that Moses has been giving to this wandering band of tired, angry, sad, confused, but somehow still hopeful Israelites just as they are on the cusp of something huge. Perhaps there are times in your own life when you resonated deeply with tired, angry, confused people on the cusp of something huge.

Carolyn Sharp, Professor of Hebrew Scriptures, writes, “The people must understand what is at stake, and they must choose life, which is serving God. Moses is urging his people to commit, heart and soul and body, to a vibrant relationship with the God in whom they live and move and have their being.” Moses tells them to make this choice not just for themselves, but so that they and their descendants will live. The way that we engage with faith is identity forming for our young people as they navigate childhood and adolescence, and it can either give them a sense of deep belonging or a deep sadness at never having quite belonged among the people who were supposed to love them unconditionally, once they were old enough to think about and express faith (and doubt) in ways that are authentic to them.

For most, it's a mixture. Along the way, we, the Church, have sometimes been careless with our words and flippant with our theology. We have treated faith development as “one size fits all” and have sometimes failed to make space for neurological and ideological differences, and the natural doubts and questions that come with emergence into adulthood. An informal survey of students interacting with a progressive campus ministry at a state university in 2023 revealed that 75% of students who shared their contact information were interested in “healing from religious trauma.”

In ministry with young adults who have experienced religious trauma, or “church hurt,” there is great power in reclaiming sacred rituals, songs, and words. This can be some of the most liberating and empowering work we do with young adults in these important, formative years. One campus ministry has ***outlined four stages of faith integration that helps to make space for everyone, no matter where they are on their faith journey, to worship, heal, learn, and grow together.*** These learnings can be applied to ministry in churches as well, even across the lifespan as we come into contact with adults of all ages who are in need of some healing, deconstruction, and faith development that helps them become who God is calling them to be.

These are the four stages:

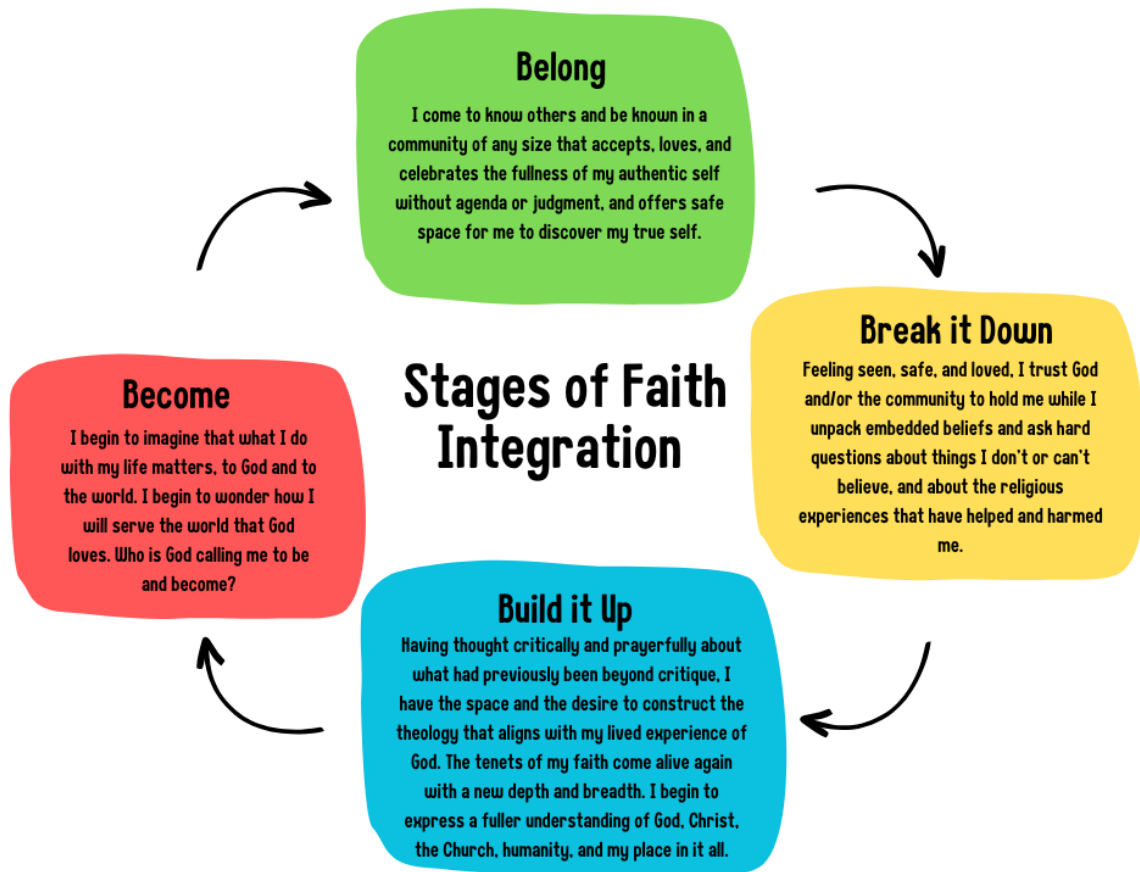
BELONG—I come to know others and be known in a community of any size that accepts, loves, and celebrates the fullness of my authentic self without agenda or judgment, and offers safe space for me to discover my true self.

BREAK IT DOWN—Feeling seen, safe, and loved, I trust God and/or the community to hold me while I unpack embedded beliefs and ask hard questions about things I don’t or can’t believe, and about the religious experiences that have helped and harmed me.

BUILD IT UP—Having thought critically and prayerfully about what had previously been beyond critique, I have the space and the desire to construct the theology that aligns with my lived experience of God. The tenets of my faith come alive again with a new depth and breadth. I begin to express a fuller understanding of God, Christ, the Church, humanity, and my place in it all.

BECOME—I begin to imagine that what I do with my life matters, to God and to the world. I begin to wonder how I will serve the world that God loves. Who is God calling me to be and become?

At any given time, our churches are filled with people who are in different stages of faith integration. It is important to note, also, that none of us go through the 4 stages and arrive, once and for all time, at the fullness of our faith and vocational call. God and life have a tendency to invite us back into the cycle with some new calling, discovery, or life circumstance. How then, might we be intentional about creating space for the distinct needs of people at each stage?



Discuss

The invitation now is to prayerfully consider how to integrate touch points for people in each stage of faith integration into all of our church and ministry activities.

Below are the four stages of faith integration listed in bold, with corresponding theological themes in italics, followed by a set of questions and/or assertions, around which ministry activities—or touch points—can be planned:

BELONG (*welcome, inclusion, celebration*) Am I safe here? Do they see me for who I am? Do they welcome all the parts of me, especially those parts that have been rejected in other places? I am welcome here with all of my doubts, fears, and questions. I am welcome here no matter what I believe or don't believe. I belong here.

BREAK IT DOWN (*deconstruction*) What did I used to believe was absolute truth that life experience proved later to be wrong? What have I professed to believe that I don't actually believe? What parts of my faith experience are foundational and what parts can I let go of? What experiences in my religious journey have made me

feel loved by God? What experiences have made me feel condemned by God? How can I trust that I am safe while I explore these questions? God welcomes my questions. I long for a community that does too.

BUILD IT UP (*constructive theology*) Who is God? Who is Christ? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in my life? Where do I see God at work? What is the role of the church in God's mission? What is the point of "doing theology"? How do I relate to people of diverse faiths and of no faith? What do I know about God that is unshakable? What do I know about myself as a child of God? What is my role in the church? What about my faith experience do I want to share with others? Theology is contextual and my context matters in faithful theological reflection.

BECOME (*vocational discernment*) What makes me feel alive? Where is the intersection of my gifts and passions and the great needs of the world? Where do I sense God's Spirit leading? What new interests and possibilities have arisen since I became intentional about my theological understanding? What curiosities do I feel an inner pull to explore? What spiritual practices might illuminate my path? What is the next faithful step? I am exploring how who I am, what I believe, and what I do intersect and inform each other.

Group Exercise: Invite group members to identify which stage they most closely relate to during this season of their life, then choose a regular activity in your church and identify touch points that already exist, or brainstorm some new ones, for people at each stage of faith integration.

Respond

Participants are asked to reflect on the following three questions:

1. What thoughts did this material spark in you? What were you reminded of or what did you learn from this lesson?
2. How will this insight shape how you pray for college students/young adults, campus ministries, parents and families of youth/young adults, college faculty and staff, your congregation, the larger church?
3. How is your group called to support or care for college students and/or those who minister to them?

Closing Prayer

Creator God, creating still, our fervent prayer is that we never stop growing and learning, never stop becoming and emerging. May we always have the prophetic imagination to perceive and co-create the new thing that you are doing in and through us. May we boldly follow where your Holy Spirit leads, even when the path ahead isn't the one our people put us on. May we lean into the wisdom of our ancestors in faith who taught us that to choose life is to cling to you, to trust in you, and to follow your leading, God. And help us

to follow the radical teachings of Jesus that lead us to redefine systems of belonging so that we might find and live into our true and authentic identity, human and divine. Amen.

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