

Young Adults In, or Out of, the Church

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.

A few years ago, a book called "Soul Searching" investigated the spiritual lives of teenagers. It found that religion can be important to teens, but it also determined that many of them adhere to what it called "moralistic therapeutic deism." This can be defined as a belief in a kind, loving God who is not connected to any particular faith tradition, and who is there largely to help in solving personal problems.

"Souls in Transition" is author Christian Smith's follow-up to the earlier book, and it gives valuable insights into the lives of those he terms "emerging adults" between the ages of 18 and 23. Emerging adults marry relatively late, may spend several years in higher education, and rarely stay for decades at the same job because of the unreliable global economy. Many are unaffiliated with any institution, and have no commitment to a worshipping community.

So which, if any, of these emerging adults might make or keep a commitment to faith? Smith answers that it is those who as teenagers had examples of older people who practiced their faith. There are other factors (such as prayer, reading of Scripture, multiple religious experiences and the absence of strong doubts in the teen years) but the example of practiced faith is the strongest indicator of future commitment. Teens who have had no such example are unlikely to develop their spiritual lives as emerging adults and will probably follow the societal trend of indifference, and sometimes hostility, to faith.

Smith rejects the idea that parents (or adult caretakers) become less significant in their children's lives during the teen years. In fact, parents' perception that their children don't want them to promote or "impose" religious beliefs and their resulting fear of doing so leaves the teens "floating in a directionless murk to figure out completely on their own some of life's most basic questions concerning reality, truth, goodness, value, morality and identity." It isn't that these children don't want their parents' involvement, Smith says. It's rather that they want it on "renegotiated" terms that "take seriously their growing maturity and desired independence."

Not only teens, but also the emerging adults who are the subject of this book benefit from the counsel, mentoring and simple presence of caring older people. Smith calls on the churches in America to recognize the unsettled and often disconnected years of emerging adulthood as a fairly new phenomenon in our fast-changing culture. Churches should create ways to reach out to emerging adults, just as they have created ways to reach out to other groups such as the elderly and families with young children.

But it really begins in the teen years, and well before. Children need relationships with adult faith models. Smith, being interviewed about "Souls in Transition," put it this way: "The most important factor is parents. For better or worse, parents are tremendously important in shaping their children's faith trajectories. That's the story that came out in 'Soul Searching.' It's also the story that comes out here."

