Spiritual Formation for Emerging Young Adults in the Ecclesial Context

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Abstract

Spiritual formation is vital to the church's growth and future. Matthew 28:19–20 reminds us of the great commission and Christ's expressed agenda for his beloved to the disciples (Aniol, 2017; New King James Version [NKJV], 1982/2011). Christ commanded that Christian leaders make disciples; lead, guide, and nurture believers to carry on the gospel message; and live out sound doctrine according to the biblical values given to us in the word of God (Aniol, 2017). Christian leaders should encourage the development of Christian character and biblical virtues, focusing on eternity as their goal (Gula, 1996). The word of God instructs Christian leaders to encourage holy living and remind emerging leaders of the benefits thereof (Aniol, 2017; NKJV, 1982/2011, 1 Pet. 1:16). Young adult emerging leaders must be granted the attention new believers receive in respect to establishing a foundational understanding of who they are becoming as a child of God (Gula, 1996) and a representative and servant of God. This discussion addresses the process, the outcome through adversity, and the result of a self-assured, God-ordained identity as a servant.

Keywords: emerging young adult, spiritual formation, spiritual development

Young adult emerging leaders must embrace the importance of Christian character and the significance of ethical behavior. It is also essential for Christian leaders to resolve that emerging leaders are young adults who have observed and examined their behavior as individuals who profess God has called them to serve the body of Christ. Therefore, the approach to preparation, and instruction should be conducted with honesty and in truth. Millennials and Generation Z are presently the main working classes in our society. Young adults should be encouraged to become leaders according to God's expectations for their lives, and their spiritual development should be directed by the Holy Spirit under the guidance of mature church leaders (NKJV, 1982/2011, 1 Sam. 3:19). The emerging leaders may already bear the burden of leadership.

This discussion is about something other than whether they are ready to lead; it addresses the importance of preparation for our young adults to lead according to scripture, leadership philosophy, and young adult spiritual development. Youth between the ages of 18 and 30 are considered young adults, known for their impressionable potential (Beaty, 2009; Setran & Kiesling, 2013). However, they are confronted with making life decisions, such as college, vocation, and understanding the call of God on their lives (Setran & Kiesling, 2013). The young adult may have to contend with the reality of leaving home, relocating, and relationships to the extent of marriage; also, crucial decisions such as purchasing a home or car and making financial investments with their hard-earned money. Decision-making bears the direct result of rewards, successes, and failures, which will produce wisdom. The former years of adult development are essential to preparing emerging leaders to fulfill the required responsibilities of their future roles (Setran & Kiesling, 2013). At this time, their worldviews and embedded theology come into testing, and the deliberation of concepts and constructs begins. The outcome of the testing becomes the reasoning and rules which serve as markers of what is meaning, purpose to life, and cause of mission.

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy report the findings of their study evaluating achieving adulthood milestones: relocating, completion of their college education, financial soundness, marriage, and children (Settersten et al., 2005). In 1960, two-thirds of young adults accomplished the five social elements of adulthood by the age of 30 (Arnet & Taber, 1994; Settersten et al., 2005). In comparison, in 2000, less than 25% of women and less than 35% of men achieved all five elements. Sociologist Christian Smith reported that 50 years ago, young adults were more concerned about graduating high school, getting married, and having children, with the family provider seeking long-term work as a career (Setran et al., 2005). Our emerging young adults have become more complex due to the devices of resources and opportunities afforded to them.

Emerging adults present some or all of the following characteristics: (a) they invest time in self-development, including their worldview; (b) they continue to find stability in their education, work, and career; (c) they learn the benefits of autonomy and independence; (d) they manage the awkward state of becoming an adult; and (e) they have the privilege of optimism, dreaming, and the power to make decisions toward achieving their goals (Setran & Kiesling, 2013). As they exit adolescence, managing adulthood weighs heavy.

However, Arnett (2000) mentions the benefit of searching various avenues and opportunities to change their minds. Upon emergence, the young adult discovers the beneficial opportunities of spiritual development to pursue and explore (Furstenberg et al., 2004). Stirring in the center of spiritual development is the expectation of becoming suitable for ministry (Arnett, 2000). The emerging leader's motives become ignited with

the potential and possibilities of contributing to restoring a ministry that has invested in its growth. Orr (1994) advised that as this is an exciting time for a zealous emerging leader, senior leaders must be aware of the idealistic and empowered approach that may require tempering. On that same note, senior leaders must be able to use the strength, passion, and love of souls (Orr, 1994; Setran, 2007).

Grant (2014) reported that 60–80% of emerging leaders who enter ministry remain in ministry for an average of 10 years. For this reason, church leadership should investigate the process of establishing emerging youth in leadership positions. The commitment to promoting spiritual stability and maintaining a healthy life of prayer and supplication to God is vital, along with mental and emotional fitness. Giving attention to such impediments and instability can contribute to the foundational attributes one will need to persevere in the life of a minister to the body of Christ.

Grant's (2014) study yielded input from pastors, both retired and seasoned; church leaders; and young adult emerging leaders, which revealed the dynamics of spiritual and leadership effectiveness and the importance of fully embracing one's identity and call to serve the church community. The study explored various activities and exchanges that develop ways to foster success in the ministry organization. Also explored were the benefits of mentorship and discipleship that yield from the senior and young adult leaders' dynamic. As mentioned, the attention given to participants' spiritual, mental, and emotional health; character; and ethics is crucial in creating an environment for community among leaders. The community of leaders will offer opportunities for leadership development and growth through interaction and fellowship.

Smith and Snell (2009) discussed six types of emerging adults.

1. Committed traditionalists (15%) have a sound commitment to Christ and can also communicate a service to the body of Christ.
2. Selective adherents (30%) have a sound faith base; however, they are selective regarding the godly principles to which they will commit. While they are not as committed as the traditionalists, they are secure in their faith agenda.
3. Spiritually open (15%) may question church structure and doctrine but they believe in the reality of a higher power.
4. Religiously indifferent (25%) are open to spiritual values yet need to be more concerned with religious construct and practice. They are rarely willing to become part of institutionalized or organized worship.
5. Disconnected (5%) have little interest and concern about religion or faith.
6. Irreligious (10%) respect the freedom to be religious. They need to see the value of faith or organized religion, which includes faith regarding government and the social issues of society.

While senior leaders have their work cut out for them, the first task is to help these emerging young adult leaders navigate their process of sanctification.

The Development of Christian Behavior

Insight from Barton (2009) referred to the senior leader or the mentor of the emerging young adult leader. Before implementation, one should take inventory and honestly assess the freedom the Holy Spirit has in their life. One's depth must surpass biblical knowledge and experience; there must be a remarkable external witness of the rich and robust intimate relationship with God. The weight of this duty is due to the responsibility of spiritual parenting and the impact of verbal and non-verbal influence. Theologian Thomas Merton (1965) asserted the possible devastation one would experience once they had tried to encourage a person to grow in developing a deeper relationship with Christ, only to see they do not have such a relationship. Merton further explained that the senior leader or mentor risks sharing impotent practices due to impartation by association. The notice to the wise is sufficient; before approaching, a God-called, God-anointed, young adult, emerging leader, it behooves proper preparation before God.

Christian behavior is explained throughout the word of God in its simplicity. Supplied for the senior leader are narratives, testimonies, examples, commandments, examples of failed attempts to achieve without Christ, and the consequences of doing so in endless literature and the word of God. (Aniol, 2017; McGrath, 1991).

There is no excuse for dropping the baton from church leadership. For the future of the church, there should be a willingness to prepare emerging leaders to whom the work of the Lord can be handed (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, 1 Thess. 3:2). Christ commanded church leadership to instruct emerging youth to observe what he has commanded to consider the lifestyle personally and honestly, not only to know but to absorb sound doctrine as a way of life (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Matt. 28). In doing so, emerging leaders will learn to understand that transformation is accomplished by yielding to the living word of God (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Rom. 12:2). This principle is essential to spiritual development; for the will of man is controlled by what he yields himself to; the inclinations of the hearts can only be subject to the receiving of the life force of the Holy Scriptures (Aniol, 2017; Chambers, 1992).

The zenith of moral authority is God, which is certified by the word of God (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Ps. 138:2; Setran, 2007). Objective and external influences that foster trust and leaning on one's moral identity choices are temporary (Setran, 2007). That being the case, the approach that partners well is the servant leadership construct. Covey's (2013) *The 8th Habit* emphasizes encouraging followers to formulate the mindset and skill set that enhances their potential. Emerging leaders often have opportunities for self-

discovery during their spiritual formation. Senior leaders are encouraging and give recognition to young adult leaders on their journey of affirmation regarding the call to ministry (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, 2 Pet. 1:10–11; Covey, 2013). The role of senior leadership in mentoring emerging young adults is using word and action communication for correction and growth.

Covey's (2013) four steps of affirmation are: (1) modeling – trust motivated by integrity; (2) pathfinding – decisions based on values and priorities; (3) aligning and prioritizing systems – to propel trust, perspective, and assurance; (4) empowering – the result of the roles of senior leadership or mentoring leader. It is the duty of senior leaders to be role models as they walk with emerging youth leaders as a moral authority. A senior leader willing to assume the task to disciple an emerging young adult for leadership will understand their role and the need to prayerfully come alongside for the journey. By moral intuition, emerging young adult leaders believe and know what is best (Smith et al., 2011).

Emerging Leaders may be encouraged to make emotionally led moral decisions that could hinder the development of true moral intuitions (Kinnaman, 2007). The licensing to avoid uncomfortable situations could prove to leave the young adult at a disadvantage (2007). Here lies the need for senior leaders to mentor emerging young adults (Smith et al., 2011; Kinnaman, 2007; Willard, 2009). Moral ethics must be based on what is right and wrong without compromise. Based on this understanding, the ability to find a center of peace and calm amid social and external conflicts should be modeled behavior of authentic moral ethics according to the word of God. In its simplicity, Paul's address to Timothy provides the vital qualities of moral behavior for any servant of God (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, 1 Tim. 1:18 & 6:10, 2 Tim. 3:10–11). Smith et al. (2011) explained that one's moral context must rest internally with honest conviction. Paul instructed Titus and the Christians of Crete to be mindful of self, be honest, and behave according to scripture and his modeled behavior, and to reflect the character of Christ (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Titus 3:1–8; Wilson, 2018).

Chambers (1998) shared in the discussion the gift of discernment and how influential perception is once approved by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will direct by the truth of the word of God; therefore, a yielded life to pray, read the word of God, and meditate on the word of God is the formula (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Rom. 12:1–2). To this emerging leader will the truth be revealed and one's visual judgment proven to be sound (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Is. 53:1). For this reason, attention is given to the need for the Holy Spirit to reside in one's temple with complete freedom and allowance to speak as he wills (*New International Version* [*NIV*], 1978/2011, 1 Cor. 20:11). Chambers (1998) advised that the life of a servant of God is never void of activity that can only be explained and sorted out by the Holy Spirit; by interpretation, understanding is received; also, one will find, through relationship, confidence in God (Wright, 2005).

Perception is the secular term for intuition—a knowing, and a knowing that what one does not know, the Holy Spirit will teach and give understanding. Such discernment is necessary in our society when ecclesial leaders must remain aware of the cultural and secular ideology that has filtered into the church (Ratliff, 1997). Young adult emerging leaders must be vigilant because, at their hands, new ideas of innovation are presented. Indeed, innovation benefits emerging leaders seeking the local church's best. Therefore, intuition, discernment, and perception cannot come by desire; senior servants of God must share with emerging leaders the importance of receiving the Holy Spirit in their lives and living a life worthy of service.

Herein is the release on the anointing of God when one makes up their mind that experience and knowledge are futile without the revealed word of God active in their life (Chambers, 1998; Wright, 2005). However, the knowledge of the word of God is used through adversity to guide their development as Christ is glorified.

God's Strength in Man's Weakness

Discipleship in the church can stand a teaching revision. As Christian leaders, we are faithful to teach the word and model the word in deed (Coe, 2009). However, we are not good examples of graciously suffering, almost to a fault, to display our humanity. The church community grows due to participation in the events of the church; inclusion is important concerning identity and belonging (Hagberg & Guelich, 2004). The inner life is the first primary which means fewer activities, more teaching, and the development of relationships to become worthy guides (Hagberg & Guelich, 2004). God intends that the understanding of strength is through our weakness and inability to endure tribulations without his help. Trials and tribulations make us holy, more like Christ (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Gal. 2:20). Holiness must still be the goal and be displayed in the lives of Christian leaders, not do-gooders. (Lovelace, 1973; Willard, 2006). Burns (2020) described adversity as hard, trying times and experiences that, if one had the power, they would extinguish it. Such experiences are when we produce the oil of holiness in becoming complete, perfect, and entire, desiring nothing (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, James 1:4). The benefit of the examination of one's faith is necessary for the process of spiritual formation. Burns offered a systematic perspective as church leaders address the substance of their discipleship approach to young leaders and church followers.

Burns (2020) conducted a research exercise with 12 adults working through adversity. His findings gave attention to three significant categories: (a) one's awareness of self and God's grace, (b) a willingness to yield once one receives an understanding of God's grace and (c) the sharing of God's grace, the reality of time, and the process of growth in discovery and surrender. The adults in the study learned the dynamics of God's intention, the frailty of man, and God's sovereign design. The church community grows due to participation in the events of the church; inclusion is essential concerning identity and belonging (Hagberg & Guelich, 2004). However, the inner life must be

given primary attention, which means fewer activities, more teaching, and the development of relationships to become worthy guides (Cope, 2015; Hagberg & Guelich, 2004). John Helm (1985) posits the need for the church to communicate the importance of placing emphasis on their theology of spiritual formation. This theology will be received through their preaching and teaching of the word of God. However, this is a mindset and a resolve they must embrace with the resolution that God is at his optimal usage when we can declare weakness as a spiritual accomplishment to dependence on God (Black, 2012; Dawn, 2002).

The Apostle Paul gave attention to the writings of the church of Corinth (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, 2 Cor. 12:10; Foster, 1984). He shared, as personal yet genuine for all, that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. In this, one learns the strength of God personally in a way that contributes to developing spiritual formation. In Paul's communication, it was his effort to address the prevailing miseducation of strength and weakness.

Burns (2020) reminded us that the church of Corinth was heavily influenced due to their societal and cultural attraction to worldly symbols of status and gains, such as wealth, spiritual influence, physical strength displayed in sports, and the verbal expression of philosophy. Paul tried to disturb the construct and insert the word of truth by showing the church God's attainable strength through surrendering to God (Ortlund, 2010).

The emerging leaders' maturing developing process will establish propensity to live holy and search deeper into the study of the word of God and a deeper prayer life (Chambers, 1998). This mindset leads them to the cross of Jesus Christ; the arrival reveals the mystery of salvation and the significance of adversity. At this point, death and sanctification are exchanged. The will of God is that every leader yields to the process of sanctification and total surrender to the Holy Spirit; it is the denial of self and personal aspirations to the known safety of God's divine will (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Luke 14:26). The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount serves as a notification of directives Christ demands from anyone who claims they are answering the call to minister (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Matt. 5:3).

The senior leader and the emerging young adult must yield to pressing and surrender one's autonomy. Christ's teachings contend with the servant's heart's inner doom as one absorbs the common thread of losing oneself, a sense of rack and ruin (Chambers, 1992). Blessed are the poor in spirit—the first concept of poverty and the principle of relinquishing anything that produces self-value.

This revelation releases the mental concept of possession, both naturally and in one's sense of spiritual accomplishments (Chambers, 1992; Luther, 1956; *NKJV*, 1982/2011, Mat. 5:3). Christ affirmed that the servant leader who places those they serve before

their own needs can serve in confidence and believe that their service of love is insured by the promise of residency in the kingdom of God.

Willimon (2019) added that the unfortunate act of emerging leaders is the notion that they must look or appear spiritual; they have become convinced that they must be perceived as competent; however, they overdo the performance. Christ's instructions to the child of God oppose their attempt at spiritual aggrandizement. Gaventa (2021) shared Willimon's wisdom on his explanation of elements of self-aggrandizement: tangible possessions, social and spiritual honor, and popularity. Their agendas confuse a direct opposing message of the gospel and expectations of a servant of God (Willimon, 2010; *NKJV*, 1982/2011, Luke 18:11–12; Willimon, 2019). However, the testing that takes place in spiritual formation, without question, examines and purifies the willing vessel to be poor and in desperate need of the person of the Holy Spirit to empower them, knowing that they are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. The result of adversity is a virtue, the moral behavioral display of Christ-like behaviors and spiritual ethics.

The Result of Adversity

Virtue is the substance of a person that dictates their behavior (Aniol, 2017). The choice to live by this guiding principle activates the word of God and shapes our moral behavior (Harris, 2006). Virtue produces propensity nurtured by the processing of spiritual formation (Aniol, 2017).

The fruit of spiritual development creates a desire to seek God's pleasure; this happens when the newness of salvation is made real due to the formation experience (Aniol, 2017). The emerging leader who discovers the rich quality of their relationship with Christ will understand the born-again encounter, the reality of being a new creature, and the newness of man's heart to obey God (2017; *NKJV*, 1982/2011, 2 Cor. 5:17, Rom. 6:17–18). Encouraging young adult emerging leaders to endure the examination of their character will allow the word of God to become the indicator of how to live a moral life (Gula, 1996) consistently. These habits are the repeated actions that define one's identity; for example, I enjoy doing good; I am a good person.

Wood (2008) contributed to this discussion of Kant's findings on virtue as a habit that creates inner freedom when formed. Virtue becomes an ability to comply with legislation and the disciple to endure external difficulties for the sake of what is proper and lawful. The outcome is displayed in the action instinctively. However, the wisdom of Kant also warns that behavior void of conviction and desire to live a moral life is impotent (Frankena, 1973). Often, church leadership becomes content with the faithful execution of service a young adult renders to the church due to the lack of young adults and the desire not to discourage young adults from attending church services. There is

a fear senior leaders have in teaching and encouraging the attending young adult to live a yielded life because it may discourage them from attending.

Aniol (2017) reminded church leaders that people who desire to know God are willing to obey God, allowing their inclinations to be influenced by the exposure to God's love in the corporate worship setting (Lewis, 2001). Gula (1996) shared that virtue propels one to seek out, conceive vision, and grasp God's purpose for their life. Culturing virtue is vital; however, the approach to doing this is equally important. There are two types of inclinations to consider. Aniol (2017) offers consideration to examine virtue in two respects. The first is the lower inclination or tendency, which is impulsive and physical; service action can be influenced. These tendencies are surface and also impulsively triggered. The second is the higher inclination, which is soulish or can be seen as activated by devotion, and willful choice or decisions are less impressionable (Aniol, 2017; Edwards, 1746/1978).

Conclusion - Making their Call and Election Sure

May (1991) presented a mindset each emerging young adult needs to resolve. The question of identity will prompt emerging leaders to determine who they want to be. The moral and ethical makeup of the person is recognized in their presentation of the quality of character. In this respect, virtue, again, becomes a significant factor for the behavior and must coincide with their beliefs and values. An ecclesial leader's attributes are professional and pastoral; caring for God's beloved is paramount (*NKJV*, 1982/2011, Eph. 1:6). Service excellence is by godly character and virtue. Schuller (1980) contributed findings from Smith and Wood's (2003) learning goals assessment. The results render significance as we discuss virtue in emerging young adult leaders (Aleshire, 1980). The assessment was administered to leaders across denominations. While attendance was voluntary, the only requirement was the desire to become better skilled in training future leaders and the importance of being character driven and effective in ministry (Gula, 1996; Smith & Wood, 2003).

The study yielded evidence of the competing characteristics of virtue: (a) maintaining self-indulgent behaviors that impede ministry service; (b) self-serving behavior that prevents an honest application of a loving savior, such as behaviors that discourage fellowship and unity; and (c) consistent display of immaturity in the faith and a lack of desire to represent Christ properly in the difficulties of ministry (Aleshire,1980; 1980; Smith & Wood, 2008). Setran (2020) offered more results regarding identity and the emerging young adult. The National Survey of Youth and Religion reports the decline of young adults who willingly claim their faith.

As discussed earlier, young adults believe their faith is vital; however, we must grapple with the fact that fewer engage in organized worship (Smith, 2009). Setran (2020)

reported that only 25% of Protestant young adults share an intimate relationship with Christ, directly connecting to practice and lifestyle. Smith (2009) added that studies show that Christians, aged 18–25 years, are the least religious practicing young adults in the United States.

Another dynamic to consider is the stage in a young adult's life where they seek to establish their identity. During this critical period, they deliberate their embedded theology and seek to self-identify (Arnett, 2000; Setran, 2020). Emerging leaders should confirm their convictions in Christendom. Establishing their various roles also becomes necessary in the developmental process. In the process of self-discovery, there is an opportunity to scrutinize skills and talents to deliberate what they believe should be given attention for progressive growth (Jones & Abes, 2013). Setran (2020) explained how examining one's narrative discovers identity; for an ecclesial leader, one should consider the narrative embedded in the theology of origin (Jones & Abes, 2013). Frick (2016) reported on Gerhard's system to evaluate one's embedded theology:

1. Examine one's biblical base.
2. What are the religious traditions? Are they biblically sound?
3. Does one have the spiritual reasoning skills to discern what may not be explainable in the secular context?
4. Does the ideology verify as accurate? Can the principle be found in scripture?

The examination will allow the young adult courage to see into their construct and the ability to question what is valid and what is not.

The Piagetian process can be instrumental in such a deliberation for emerging leaders. This process enables the young adult to investigate conceivably and theoretically with the ability to connect information symbolically (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Examination on this level enhances vision and perception, strengthening one to portray various roles skillfully. The outcome of this deliberation supplies stability and footing. For spiritual development, one would find themselves steadfast, able to carry future tasks because their conviction is established on the rock, Christ Jesus (*NIV*, 1978/2011, Matt. 6:17–18). McLean (2005) resolved that the benefit of studying and revisiting one's embedded theology in one's narrative is the opportunity to determine one's self-concept by deciding what should remain as valuable; in doing so, the identity of a young adult emerging leader will be established.

A senior leader who ventures to disciple future young adult leaders will prove themselves to foster Paul's example. Paul admonished his followers to follow him as he followed Christ. Let us, therefore, embrace this concept to answer the call to serve fully.

About the Author

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