

by Thomas K. Chu

Young Adults: Spiritual Typology

As we come into contact with young adults in our daily environments, whether at work, in our casual connections with strangers, in greeting visitors in our congregations, it is useful to acknowledge that there are various spiritual perspectives and experiences that persons bring with them. Consider the following typology which might be useful for “mapping” your surroundings (this is intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive):

Loyalists have grown up in or adopted by choice a single religious tradition. Most loyalists think they know a lot about their own tradition, whether they actually do or not, and some have social networks tightly connected around their worshipping community. Belonging matters as much as substance.

Seekers describe themselves on a quest for knowledge, deeper spiritual connection, and are experimental. If you encounter a seeker in a congregational setting, more likely than not this person has stopped at other places along the way, probably picking up charisms and detecting good practices from other traditions, including ones not clearly Christian. Seekers will ask questions and expect good answers.

Lapsed persons have left a spiritual or religious tradition by active or benign neglect. Many lapsed people report that their multiple signals to the need for attention to life crises were ignored. Few lapsed persons re-join but some may seek another tradition. Most find themselves with no faith community.

Unactualized persons don't actively acknowledge an interest in God or the sacred. When pressed, they might say that they experience effervescence in mass gatherings such as outdoor concerts or in exhilarating sports.

Which spiritual type best represents where you are today? What would you think are the “shadows” for each type? Consider this typology as an invitation to look more closely at the relationships you may already have with young people and to recognize the presence of God in their personal and social histories, by sharing your own faith story and offering an invitation into community.

If you thought that you had nothing to say to a young adult, following are some questions you could ask (these were conceived and compiled by the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology at Church Divinity School of the Pacific):

1. What's your life story up to this point, particularly since college (or high school)?
2. What do you love most about your life? Why?
What do you love most about being alive here, today? Why?

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groundwork

MINISTRY WITH YOUNG ADULTS & “NEXT GENERATIONS”

3. What do you hate most about your life? Why?
What do you hate most about being alive here, today? Why?
4. Where do you feel is the control in different areas in your life: is control within your grasp, or is control exerted from outside forces in the environment?
5. OK, say something bad — terrible — happens in your life, or to someone you know. Anything like that happen in the recent past? How do you understand or make sense of life when things are not going well?
6. How do you understand or make sense of life when things are going well — really well? What do you do to cope with things going well?
7. When have you felt really connected to the human race, the world, the universe, or some large group greater than yourself? When have you felt really alone? Describe these circumstances.
8. What have been some of “intense” experiences that you carry with you — either positive or negative — within the last two years?
9. What books, movies, or events have really impacted your life? Why? Describe the impact.
10. In what areas of your life do you really invest the most energy — a lot of energy?
In what areas do you invest the least energy — the minimum energy necessary?
11. What takes the most out of you? What takes the least out of you?
12. What kinds of things make you feel alive — in your own life?
13. Think for a minute about the world as you know it. How do you make sense of the world? What kind of a place is the world, in general, to you?
14. How do you fit into the world? — What do you see as your place in the world?
15. Tell me a story about how you came to believe as you do.
16. Tell me a story about something that you think captures the core of who you are.
17. What’s the most important value or belief in your life? Is there a principle by which you try to live your life? What is your general feeling about religion right now? What is your feeling about spirituality? What do you consider your most important experience with religion, the experience that has brought you to your current feeling about religion?
18. Do you belong to any group (not necessarily religious) that helps lift your spirits? Any group that gives you a sense of purpose? Any group that is really important to you?
What are one or two images to describe that group?
What do you get from the group?
What do you give to the group?
What kinds of things do you do together?
How did this group get started? Who cooked it up?
What’s the magic of this group? What makes it tick?
What makes you feel really alive, in this group? ■