

Through the wilderness to the Promised Land

Lived experience of emerging adults in The Salvation Army

An 'Exodus'

There is an 'exodus' of emerging adults from churches, a mass movement from attendance and identifying with Christianity. Whether they were never involved or have since left, most faith communities struggle to engage with emerging adults. This 'exodus' raises questions for the Salvation Army. Why is what we're doing not working? How do we connect with emerging adults who have not grown up in churches? How can our churches help emerging adults' faith grow and develop? If emerging adults are leaving the Church, where is their faith going?

Practice Principles

To explore these questions, the Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team engaged in lived experience research with emerging adults about their lives and spirituality. As a result, we identified practice principles to support emerging adults to thrive in life and faith. We found that faith communities meaningfully engage emerging adults when they:



Meet them where they are



Walk alongside them



Empower them to take ownership



Help them to discover purpose

Emerging adults are moving into a new phase of life where everything is changing. To help their faith develop, we must support them in finding what it means for them and how it applies to their lives. As they encounter challenges to their faith, we must help them resolve these challenges so that their faith can grow and mature. We can use these four practice principles to guide us.

Meeting emerging adults where they are means engaging with them on their terms. Emerging adulthood is an exciting time when they are open to new possibilities, including different beliefs. Instead of demanding they fit into our programs and structures, we must find ways to meet with them and celebrate them as individuals. We must listen to their questions and struggles with empathy and compassion. We meet them where they are by asking them questions about their beliefs and helping them try new faith practices.

As emerging adults go on their journey they need us to **walk alongside them**. As their lives become more chaotic and they face many choices and paths, they need stable people who will accept and be there for them. They need supportive communities of peers and adults who can provide support and advice when asked. They need mentors who can ask wise questions that promote growth and discovery. As we walk alongside them, we can encourage and help them put their faith into action.

Emerging adulthood is a time of freedom but also responsibility. We must **empower them to take ownership** of their lives and faith. We can help them articulate and evaluate their goals and beliefs. We can provide new opportunities to explore their potential. We must treat their ideas seriously, even if they differ from ours. If we can help them articulate what they believe and stand for, we will have empowered them to have a resilient faith into adulthood.

Like everyone else, emerging adults are trying to find what their lives mean. We can **help them discover purpose** in their lives so that they can have direction and fulfilment. We can identify and encourage the skills, gifts, and passions they can use to make a difference in the world. Many emerging adults told us how their faith was expressed through their vocation, whether in ministry

roles or other jobs. We can invite emerging adults into communities trying to make a difference and change the world together.

The Promised Land

Facing the 'exodus' of emerging adults from faith communities can feel daunting. But in Scripture, the Exodus was a defining moment of God's love and redemption for His people (Ex 3:15-22). What if we understood emerging adults' 'exodus' not as a move away from faith but as a journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land? If we think less about what they are leaving and focus more on where they are going, we can embrace the possibilities and hope of emerging adulthood. For emerging adults, this 'promised land' is developing a confident faith that is owned and lived out, which gives a sense of meaning, hope, and purpose. When we support emerging adults on their journey in life and faith using our four practice principles, we can go with them through the wilderness of questions and challenges to the promised land of hope and faith on the other side.

