

**Adulthood Begins at Thirty-Two:
Accompanying Younger Adults in Their Search for Meaning and Purpose**
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In 2025, neuroscientists from Cambridge University published a study in the journal *Nature Communications* which should cause us to reconsider what we think we know about guiding the spiritual development of young adults. Using datasets of MRI diffusion scans, researchers compared nearly four thousand humans brains between infancy and ninety years old, finding that our brains go through significant shifts at roughly the ages of nine, thirty-two, sixty-six, and eighty-three (Mousley, et. al).

One of the most striking results of this finding is that adolescence ends and actual adulthood begins only around the age of thirty-two. Prior to this, the brain is in a state of continuing development with growing white matter and increasing efficiency in neural communication. After this, we move into adulthood with a more stabilized brain structure that often remains unchanged for the next three decades of life, except for increasing segmentation (ibid).

In essence, until people are in their early thirties, they are still making key neurological connections which can profoundly affect their emerging beliefs, values, worldview, relationships, and sense of the Divine. As spiritual directors, this finding should cause us to contemplate what it means to accompany “young adults,” acknowledging that they are actually still in late-stage adolescence.

Starting over (again)

How can and should this change the way we approach spiritual companionship with people in their twenties as compared to older adults? I have been on a journey with this question since 2019 when two things happened that forever changed the course of my spiritual direction and ordained ministries. The first is that I was selected to be a member of Spiritual Directors International’s (SDI) “New Contemplatives” cohort. A group of eleven of us, all aged “40-ish and under” (I was the “ish” at 42 years old), were invited to a year of conversation about the future of spiritual direction, especially across generational boundaries. We had rich conversations coming from a broad diversity of religious, cultural, and theological perspectives. I am forever grateful for this opportunity and honor.

The second significant event began with a phone call I received out of the blue. The Episcopal chaplaincy at Texas A&M University was vacant mere weeks before fall classes were to begin and the bishop’s office wanted to know if I would step in and lead them. Though I had been leading a small campus ministry for LGBTQIA students at a local community college, I had not imagined that I might do this kind of work full-time at a major university. However, accepting the call, I entered into more challenging, rewarding, deeply authentic, and vulnerable conversations than I had ever encountered in a traditional church or spiritual direction setting.

In both cases, I accepted an opportunity not knowing what it would lead to or exactly what I was doing. Though I had been an ordained Episcopal priest for fifteen years at that point, I

was newly trained as a spiritual director. And though I had worked with this generation of young adults throughout their lifetime in both church and religious school settings, it was my training as a spiritual director and my time in the SDI cohort which proved to be my true preparation for such a vocation.

In my experience, older generations presume that by the end of college young adults should have a good sense of who they are, their career goals, and what they are looking for in their relationships. Perhaps older generations expect this because it is what was expected of them at that age. But at the start of every spring semester, I would inevitably have a parade of seniors come through the door of my office, facing down graduation and completely unsure what the next step in life would or should hold for them. We would discuss their values, their gifts and how they might use them to help others, what they learned from previous friendships and romantic relationships, and what it means to have to “start over” for the second time in their very nascent adult life. But they were still left wanting a greater sense of direction.

The best advice I could manage to give them was: Don’t worry that you don’t have it all figured out, you still have plenty of time, you will likely never have a more opportune time in your life to search for answers than you have now. Before they hopped on a career track, dove into a serious relationship, or committed to living in one particular area, they should go live a little, see the world, and take all the time they needed to figure out who they were and what they wanted out of life. I was, without realizing it at the time, assuring them that their adolescence didn’t have to end just yet.

Do they or don’t they?: conflicting data

Our twenties are a wonderful time to continue to discover ourselves. This is perhaps not news to older generations. But clearly this was permission that Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, didn’t feel they could give themselves. They were already weary of living off their parent’s support and generosity. They wanted to become self-sufficient. Most of all, they felt they had to have it all figured out *right now*.

This drive for stability and certainty in an unstable and uncertain world is often leading them to follow some particularly loud and deeply divisive voices in our society, voices who claim to have all the answers these young adults are looking for. As a Christian pastor, I lament to admit that often those loud, misguided, and misguiding voices include many Christians of a particular stripe. They tell young adults what kind of world they should work to create, who they should and shouldn’t love, and offer what seems like a shortcut to a solid personal identity—just become one of “us” and thereby join “us” in the battle against “them.”

These voices were particularly abundant at a place like Texas A&M University, with an enormous undergraduate population of 70,000 students, often raised in conservative and highly religious families. Some Christian groups on campus boasted attendance in the thousands at their gatherings. Meanwhile I led one of the few LGBTQIA affirming ministries on campus, and one of the largest Episcopal student ministries in the country, with a total community of just under 100 people. Rather than give students “good answers” I challenged them to ask “good questions” and be in open dialogue and mutual respect across their differences of opinion and belief.

We started an interfaith dialogue, meeting semi-annually with our friends next door at the oldest Hillel Center in the country and with our Muslim, Mormon, and other willing Christian counterparts. And still, even when we all gathered together, we were but a mere fraction of the size of other religious groups. Furthermore, groups such as ours were blocked from participating in popular religious camps for freshmen students because we would not sign on to their exclusionary faith statements. We could not be heard above the noise of so many others. I would regularly meet Episcopalian students who had no idea our campus ministry even existed.

Yet, with so many religious spaces overflowing with young adults, Gen Z seems to clearly be looking for guidance. The question remains, how many are actually seeking it through traditional religious groups? The answers are mixed and largely depend on who you ask. Some outlets report that Gen Z is attending church in higher numbers than their parents or grandparents. A recent Barna Group study found that Gen Z attends religious services an average of 1.9 weekends a month as compared to Gen X at 1.6 and Boomers at 1.4 (2025). The New York Times has also reported that it is “young men who now register higher in attachment to basic Christian beliefs, in church attendance and in frequency of Bible reading” (Graham, 2024).

Meanwhile, other media outlets and research groups moderate or even flatly refute these numbers. Ryan Burge reports the shift among young men is more modest and that “weekly attendance rates for men born around 2000 is 25% ... about three points higher than men who were born twenty-five years earlier and 2-3 points higher than young adult women” (Burge, 2024). In a report released at the end of 2025, Pew Research stated, “On average, young adults remain much less religious than older Americans. Today’s young adults also are less religious than young people were a decade ago. And there is no indication that young men are converting to Christianity in large numbers” (Dimock, 2019). Whatever the data may suggest, the murder of American far-right commentator Charlie Kirk shone a light on at least one segment of the young adult population that is keenly interested in religious voices who offer firm and simple answers to contextually complex questions (Williams, 2025).

Then there is the question of if young adults are interested in or have the emotional and mental capacity to wrestle with nuanced worldviews. Here again, the research is mixed. Ipsos researchers find that Gen Z is no less likely to trust traditional social pillars of media and business than other generations, while Gallup research points to higher degrees of distrust as compared to older generations (Phillips and Grinyer, 2023; Hrynowski and Marken, 2023).

Reason for doubt and reason for hope

If Gen Z young adults have greater degrees of distrust, it is not hard to imagine why. This generation journeyed through early adolescence during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time which deeply shook our sense of security and well-being in the world. They have never known a time when the national political rhetoric was not toxically divided. They don’t seem to believe that mainstream media outlets are places where anything unbiased can be found. They are more likely to be informed by who they follow on social media but are becoming increasingly wary of what they find there due to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI).

In a few years, AI will become so pervasive and advanced it seems it will be impossible to determine on our own if a video clip of a religious or political leader is real or not. The

ensuing fallout in trust is likely to cause a landslide that will radically redefine the contours of our society. Where, then, can young adults turn to find spaces and people they can trust to help them navigate a more complex world than humankind has ever known? The answer may well lie in spiritual companionship, especially spiritual companionship with one another.

Gen Z's trust in family and peer groups remains quite high compared to their trust in media, faith leaders, and politicians. In a survey of 9,600 Gen Z young adults, market researcher Edelman found, "the people that Gen Z trusts the most—family members (88 percent), friends (84 percent) and ordinary people doing good (81 percent)—far outrank journalists (47 percent), religious/faith leaders (44 percent) and politicians (42 percent) as sources of inspiration" (Martin, 2022). If young adults trust their family and friends nearly twice as much as religious or faith leaders, then encouraging them to turn to one another rather than the voice of an unrelated elder will undoubtedly be better received and have longer lasting and deeper impact.

As a religious leader and a spiritual director, this is sobering news. But it is also an incredible opportunity. Rather than seek to get them to attend my church or engage my spiritual direction practice, I have chosen to go all in on a model that supports mutual, communal discernment through peer-learning and group spiritual direction.

In 2025 I received an invitation to become the founding director of The Community of Saints Francis and Clare in West Texas. In January 2026 we launched our first cohort of seven young adults ages nineteen to thirty, all living together in a semi-monastic intentional community for a period of several months per cohort. These remarkable people surprise me daily with their depth of knowledge about history, religion, and spirituality. They are clearly more deeply curious and well informed than myself or my peers were at that age.

The internet, namely YouTube, and the ease of accessibility to books and articles through the internet, seem to have given them a rich and fertile field that they have eagerly explored on their own. Whereas my self-education was limited by what I could find in my local library, bookstore, or faith community, their self-education has occurred amid endless and endlessly accessible resources. At half my age they often know as much or more than I do about matters that I have been studying my whole life. It is a wonder to behold.

In our community, we are fostering deeper conversation through slower-paced living and abundant time for developing profound and trusting relationships. We create space for them to discern the movement of God's spirit in their lives through living out a Rule of Life centered around the four pillars of service, spirituality, study, and simplicity. As their director, rather than being a "sage on the stage," I facilitate group discussion, bring in a variety of teachers, and resource them around their particular interests and learning goals. Participation in traditional spiritual direction is encouraged; however all learning sessions are conducted under a group spiritual direction model where each person's voice is heard and honored. Any one person in the group could be the source of wisdom on any given subject.

We draw inspiration from the lives of Saint Francis and Saint Clare of Assisi, young adults who, 800 years ago similarly eschewed the expectations of their society to engage the spiritual life and serve people on the margins of society. At the end of each cohort, our capstone event is going together on pilgrimage to Assisi, Italy. To ensure all have equal ability to participate, their basic living expenses are covered for the duration of the experience, and tuition, room, and board are covered through a full-ride scholarship for those who are invited to join.

This model is not necessarily novel but the opportunities for young adults to engage in spiritual community in this way remain far too scarce. To me, this is clearly the kind of spiritual accompaniment and guidance that is most likely to have a significant impact, due to their trust in peers and desire for authentic community.

If adulthood doesn't begin until the age of thirty-two, then a thirty year-old is in need of reliable guidance and mentorship every bit as much as a sixteen year old, and indeed, in many of the same ways. They are still constructing a values and belief narrative to make sense of the world and their place in it. They cannot be expected to have firmly decided on answers to questions around vocation, relationships, and personal identity. Ample space needs to be given for discernment done in community with peers.

Centering the right voice

Spiritual direction remains key, but they are perhaps less likely to seek out and trust the direction of a singular person from a generation that has never lived through the challenges they have already faced and will be facing. Social media and online influencers shaped their childhood. AI will shape their adulthood in profound and unique ways to their generation.

For those of us in older generations who seek to support and resource them, perhaps the greatest gift we can give is time and space for them to lean into one another and explore the riches of our faith traditions on their own terms. We can foster safe communities that value their agency and discovery while offering ourselves as peripheral resources and loving caregivers rather than centralized directors of their learning endeavors.

Rather than convince young adults to listen to our voices, we can and should help them to find their own. This may never make us as popular as those who would seek to sell them self-assured and simple answers to life's complexity. But it is a gift they crave and that, at least here in a small town in west Texas, a small group of young adults are eagerly embracing. In all likelihood, if offered a similar space, such young adults can be found in every town across the country and the world. The opportunity is thrilling. The potential impact is enormous. And the honor to walk with them is the gift of our lifetime.

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Biography



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