

Book Review

“Souls in Transition” by Christian Smith

Christian Smith's book, *Souls in Transition*, is an important work about the religiosity of young adults. As the name implies, it considers the years from age 18-23, where great transitions and disruptions often negatively impact the religious lives of young people. Churches are constantly looking for ways to attract college age students and “twenty-somethings” and regret the decline of religious attendance among such young people. *Souls in Transition* gives a hopeful word – “don’t give up.” Smith writes that the witness of parents, teachers, pastors and other role models continue to shape the moral and religious character of young people even when it might not seem so.

If churches are to attract young adults, or “emerging adults,” as Smith refers to them, they must understand them. Smith helps paint pictures of the different types of religious involvements and attitudes of 18-23 year olds and how their experience and attitudes intersect with culture and family life. Smith's book is well researched and includes surveys from a wide range of young adults, and helpful real world anecdotes. It is nuanced and looks at the differences between mainline Protestants, Catholics and Evangelicals emerging adults.

Souls in Transition is important, in part, because young adults are also a potential mission field for churches. Many of the problems that used to worry social scientists when they looked at teenagers - unwanted pregnancies, drug and alcohol use, violence and behavior problems - are now reaching crisis mode among many populations of young adults, ironically at a time when interventions have made great improvements for teenagers in these same areas. Fortunately, as Smith notes, having a faith connection can help provide stability and improved outcomes for “emerging adults.” While they might be pessimistic about many parts of society, these young people remain generally optimistic about their own lives.

The book gives a hopeful word that the religious faith of young adults does not decline as sharply during young adult years as has been reported. For anyone interested in what the religious and spiritual lives of

18 to 23 year olds look like, in what social influences shape their lives, and in how people change religiously and spiritually as they enter their twenties, *Souls in Transition* provides some answers.

The book provides important cultural and familial analysis in many areas, including analyzing how liberal Protestantism may have undermined itself by having too much success as it merged with many parts of the mainstream culture, finding that college experiences do not necessarily have the negative impact on religiosity that some have assumed they do, suggesting that religious outcomes for emerging adults are greatly influenced by the events and influences of their early years, and explaining that emerging adults who have faced serious life difficulties often find religion to be a helpful resource.

As churches seek to nurture meaning and character in the lives of their young members, this work is of value. Pastors often talk about how we all on a religious journey. *Souls in Transition* helps consider a time period when young people go through some of their most profound transitions. If you are a parent or a chaplain trying to understand your college aged student, if you are a church leader hoping to attract more young adults to visit and join your congregation, or if you are a concerned citizen looking for an emerging mission field in order to make a difference in the world, then *Souls in Transition* will help inform your efforts.

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