

St. Stephen's, Armonk. NY

A Minister for Young People – Making the Case

Throughout human history, adolescence has been a momentous time. Making that complex transition from childhood to adult, from dependence to independence, has been always been a heady mix of excitement, confusion, anxiety and exhilaration.

Today's children and youth are growing up in a world of huge opportunity, with a greater acceptance of diversity than previous generations, greater life-expectancy and huge steps forward in health-care, literacy and time for leisure pursuits.

But though there are upsides, there are downsides, too. In fact, today's children and youth – 'Generation Z' – also face colossal challenges which no former generation has had to navigate.

Every member of GenZ is a digital native. While previous generations were always trying to acquire information, GenZ is overwhelmed by information, and escaping our 24/7 world is increasingly difficult. Not only has the work/life balance been eroded, but there is little chance for young people today to escape the relentless peer pressure. Society is discovering that far from social media serving us, we are becoming enslaved to it. It may turn out to be as damaging to our health as we now know smoking cigarettes was. There is intense social media pressure to present curated, flawless images of ourselves as if we were simply products being marketed. It's not just young people that are under that pressure, but if you've never known a world without social media, couple that with the age-old insecurities and anxieties of growing up, and the pressure to appear perfect – and never uncool – is unforgiving. Some young people have resorted to taking hundreds of selfies every day, in a bid for the perfect one, or use filtering apps that airbrush out any imperfections or even seek out cosmetic procedures in a bid to bolster low self-esteem.

Yet, despite the pressures of using social media, the pressures of not using it are arguably even greater. Adolescence now is always anxiously beset by the phenomenon of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), since friendships, activities and relationship are so heavily dependent on social media.

Although modern life may be full of opportunities, the downside is that many of the certainties which Boomers and Gen Xers enjoyed are gone: the idea of a job for life is way in the past, and even a house purchase is often an impossibly distant dream. Since nowadays the expectation is that our young people get a college degree and, certainly in our neighborhood, from a very good college, requires such demanding academic achievement, accompanied by a resume so full of extra-curricular accomplishments that it is little wonder that our youth are feeling burnt out even before they get to college. They know that their future employment and prosperity is driven by every little extra thing they can do to get the edge and get into their dream school. They also know from their friends and siblings that they'll be saddled with a crippling burden of debt from college.

It is documented that in order to keep that competitive edge in their grades and the ability to just keep up with the pressure, prescription amphetamines like Adderall and Ritalin are routinely abused. The use of prescription anti-anxiety and anti-depressants has sharply risen and, more seriously, self-medication with alcohol and narcotics as an escape route from daily pressures have manifested themselves in part in this country's opioid crisis. Parts of Westchester are among the highest in the country for this.

This bleak picture is right now playing out against the backdrop of genuinely existential crisis for GenZ inheriting, as they are, the stewardship of a planet in such deep trouble that it might already have reached tipping point. At school, fears of gun-related violence have made security guards and active-shooter drills the norm for our children. And as a nation, our young people look at the lack of civility in our political discourse and don't seek their role models in our elected leaders. Rather, our elected leaders might well look to our young people, who have taken a strong lead in trying to curb school shootings and advocating for environmental change. Whatever our political stance, we should be applauding and encouraging our young people when they take on these issues and work for the common good. Young people have always been blessed with fearlessness. Let's be inspired by that.

Our young people – even though older generations might not realize it – are also thinking just as deeply about matters of faith and spirituality and we in the church need to listen to them. Tired of the narrow-mindedness and silo mentality of religions, and the hypocrisy and scandal rife in the Church, young people are signing out of traditional faith life in droves. Just before Easter 2019, statistics released from the General Social Survey revealed that for the first time ever, the biggest religious affiliation in the United States was ‘none’. Driving this trend has been Millennials and, increasingly, GenZ. Yet there is an increasing interest in spiritual health, and the yearnings that humans innately have for a connection with ‘The Divine’ are as strong as they ever were. The most recent Religious Landscape Study from the Pew Forum found that almost three-quarters of younger millennials believed in God with a high degree of certainty, and almost 60% said that religion was important to them. Over 55% prayed at least once a week, some daily. Around 60% experienced a sense of spiritual peace and wellbeing at least once a week. There is also a thirst for how one lives a good life, with a moral compass to direct us through the often rocky terrain, and an interest in structured and traditional worship like ours being reported right across the board in all denominations.

This is the world in which our young people at St. Stephen’s are living, and we want to help them navigate this complex, confusing, yet exciting world in ways that will dovetail with their busy, highly-scheduled lives and meet them where they are, both metaphorically and logistically. The days of church youth-groups where everyone met together on the same nights of the week, in the same place, are fast disappearing. In a high-achieving, highly-mobile community like ours in Westchester, we want to provide the pastoral support that our young people need. Granted, parents, school and other organizations can and do provide support but, oftentimes, being able to talk about things with someone who is not a parent, teacher or peer can be vitally life-affirming.

We envision a Minister for Young People who is a pastor, but who also organizes events that address particular issues, and bring our young people together for fun and for outreach and service opportunities, and to help them play a full part in the life of St. Stephen’s, helping them to understand the spiritual dimension of life more fully,

and finding ways to grow in spiritual and religious practices that capture their imaginations and meet them where they are. We are fortunate to be part of a denomination which is so active in its acceptance of, and inclusion of, people from all backgrounds, and more affirming of LGBTQ people than most other mainstream denominations. However, the Episcopal Church has often kept itself to itself and many outside of the Church make the assumption that all Christians are bigoted, intolerant and narrow-minded: in 2009 (check date) 91% of young adults surveyed in research by the Barna Group described Christians as anti-gay. We need to get across the message that there are places which are more loving, liberating and life-giving than many young people might either imagine or expect. A central message we want to communicate is that all people are made in the image of God and infinitely precious and beloved by God – and that through God we can work towards shaping a society which combats alienation, loneliness, low self-esteem and bullying with inclusion, encouragement, care and love.

We envision that although primarily this person will work with our youth, they will also be responsible for the ministry that serves our children and families, since these are all so interconnected. The way we serve the children in our parish will help to prepare them and give them a solid foundation as they transition through the grade school.

We envision that this will make St. Stephen's a place where families with children will know that they can find a welcoming intergenerational community with the pastoral, ethical and educational support not typically found outside of faith communities: in short, a compass calibrated to navigate today's world.