

Through the wilderness to the Promised Land

Lived experience of emerging adults in The Salvation Army





Contents

An exodus of emerging adults	4
Practice Principles for Engaging Emerging Adults	5
1. Growing into emerging adulthood	6
Who am I?	6
What comes next for me?	7
How do I take responsibility?	8
What does life mean?	9
2. Finding a personal and applied faith	10
Their open mindset	10
Their view of personal authority	11
Their suspicions of institutions	12
Their immanent worldview	13
3. Develop through faith transitions	14
Faith systems theory	14
Lewis' model of faith transitions	16
The Reaffirm Pathway	16
The Reconsider Pathway	17
The Revise Pathway	17
The Reject Pathway	17
The Promised Land	18
Bibliography	19

An exodus of emerging adults

What comes to mind when you think of emerging adults (EAs)? Maybe you picture a broke 23-year-old hipster hanging out with friends at a café, spending what little money they have on a latte and avocado on toast. Perhaps you picture a 20-year-old living at home, putting off tertiary education, or joining the workforce to take a gap year and explore the world. Maybe you think of a 25-year-old studying psychology who regularly attends protests and complains about how the world is corrupt. Elements of these pictures are true, and some may be misconceptions. Whatever stereotype you have in mind, one stereotype supported by statistical evidence is that most emerging adults do not attend church.

This is hardly a new revelation. Over the past 10-15 years, the phenomenon of EAs disengaging from faith communities, particularly in the Global West, has been widely studied.² In the most recent census, EAs were the age demographic with the highest proportion of people identifying as having 'no religion'.³ Many EAs were never involved with the Church, and many who were no longer are. Over 70% of EAs who were engaged with faith communities leave and no longer identify with organised religion.⁴ The Salvation Army in Australia is no different.

Think of the EAs you've known that have come and gone from the Salvos. For some, their lives got busier as they started working or studying. They stopped attending church to make space for these new experiences. Others graduated from high school and found that there weren't programs for them to connect with anymore, and slowly drifted away. Some EAs made a conscious decision to leave. Maybe they went to church because of their parents but decided for themselves that faith isn't meaningful or important anymore. Some EAs might have left the Salvos for another church to find peers their age or a place that better served their needs.

While it can be tempting to look at each individual's story in isolation, when we look at the big picture, we see that the Salvation Army struggles to engage EAs as a cohort.

We are seeing an 'exodus' of EAs – a mass movement away from churches. This 'exodus' raises questions for the Salvation Army. Why is what we're doing not working? How do we connect with EAs who have not grown up in church? How can our churches help EAs' faith grow and develop? If EAs are leaving the Church, where is their faith going?

While EAs are disinterested in the Church, research also suggests that EAs are still interested in spirituality.⁵ Whilst they might not formally identify with a particular religious tradition, they are open to ideas about spirituality, faith, and the meaning of life. If EAs are interested in spirituality but not the Church, how can faith communities be a resource to engage and support EAs in faith exploration? How can we help EAs' faith grow through life transitions and help EAs find new faith? This research report will explore these questions.

The challenge of engaging EAs can bring up many emotions. We may grieve the loss of EA friends and family from our faith communities. We may feel inadequate, rejected, or like we have failed them. We may feel angry and frustrated with them for abandoning us and a faith community trying to love them. While confronting our disappointments and fears is difficult, EAs need us to move through these emotions and find ways to connect with them. Even though the challenge is significant, when we engage EAs effectively, we can help them thrive as people and followers of Jesus.

1. Whilst this cohort is often referred to as 'young adults', we prefer the phrase 'emerging adults' as it more accurately describes the experience of the life phase and has become the terminology preference in the research literature on the topic. The term also focuses less on an age range (though we are typically referring to people aged 18-30) and more on a developmental period.

2. James Penner et al., *Hemorrhaging faith: Why and when Canadian young adults are leaving, staying and returning to church*, EFC Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable (Canada, 2011), among others; David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You lost me: why young Christians are leaving church - and rethinking faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerBooks, 2011); Darren Cronshaw, Rowan Lewis, and Stacey Wilson, "Hemorrhaging Faith: An Australian Response in Exile," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 23 (2016).

3. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Religious affiliation in Australia*, (Canberra: ABS, 2022).

4. Philip Hughes, "Why young people are leaving the church," *Pointers: Bulletin of the Christian Research Association* 25, no. 1 (2015).

5. Andrew Singleton et al., *Australia's Generation Z study: project report*, ANU, Deakin and Monash Universities (2019).

Practice principles for engaging emerging adults

To explore how to effectively engage EAs, the Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team engaged in lived experience research. We call this process the 'Listening Project', and for this phase of the study, we conducted lived experience interviews with 33 EAs. We did this because we believe that to understand the experience of EAs, we must listen deeply to their stories and learn from their

lives. We engaged diverse participants, including EAs from all over Australia, in cities, regional centres, and the country. We spoke to EAs connected to different kinds of Salvation Army churches, such as traditional, contemporary, missional, and small congregations. We also endeavoured to include participants from diverse backgrounds, including gender, cultural background, and sexuality.

During these interviews, we explored EAs' lives and experiences with faith and spirituality. We heard about their positive experiences in faith communities and the challenges and barriers to their faith. As a result, we identified practice principles to support EAs to thrive in life and faith. We found that faith communities meaningfully engage EAs when they:



**Meet them
where they are**



**Walk
alongside them**



**Empower them to
take ownership**



**Help them to
discover purpose**

These principles can guide us as we engage with and support EAs.

To explore these practice principles, we will look at how we can support EAs in three key areas:

1. Growing into emerging adulthood
2. Finding a personal and applied faith
3. Developing through faith transitions

In each of these sections we will hear directly from EAs' lived experience in the Salvation Army, explore examples of the practice principles in action, and learn how faith communities can play a meaningful role in the lives of EAs.

Growing into emerging adulthood

To best support EAs, we must first understand what emerging adulthood is like. Jeffrey Arnett, a human development theorist, proposed that emerging adulthood is “a distinct period of the life course for young people in industrialised societies ... characterised by change and exploration for most people, as they examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews”.⁶ In other words, emerging adulthood is a period where we have time, space, and freedom to choose the direction of our lives. We choose people with whom we will journey through life, like close friends and romantic partners. We explore education and employment opportunities. We decide our values and beliefs for ourselves. We can understand emerging adulthood as the process of EAs exploring four questions:

- Who am I?;
- What comes next for me?;
- How do I take responsibility?; and
- What does life mean?

As we dig deeper into what these questions mean for EAs, we will see how we can support them by applying our practice principles.

Who am I?

Emerging adulthood is a time when EAs experience more freedom and responsibility than ever before. As young people grow, they individuate from their families and try to fit in and belong with their peers. But as EAs leave school, they focus less on trying to fit in and more on deciding who they are for themselves. They choose their own interests, values, goals, and beliefs.

Some EAs we interviewed found this freedom empowering, while others found it daunting. Participant 48 emphasised the importance of discovering who they are:

“Finding who I am is a big thing. Now at the moment, knowing who you are, who you want to be, who you’re attracted to, is a big thing.”

Some EAs were able to explore who they are with excitement because of the support and acceptance of others. Unfortunately, other EAs described feeling abandoned, having to work out who they are and what is significant to them on their own. They need people on their side.

Every EA is different. As one participant told us:

“...your twenties is just a year that everyone’s at different levels. Not one 20-year-old is on the same path as another. You’ve got other people who are married and have kids and you’ve got others that are just becoming full time and others that are just casual still or not even working at all.”

Every EA has different needs. Because EAs are trying to figure out who they are as individuals, we need to engage with them as individuals, not as one-size-fits-all. We must meet them where they are to support them.

We can **meet EAs where they are** by:

- Asking them about their lives
- Listening with empathy and compassion to their struggles
- Engaging with them on their terms rather than expecting them to engage in our programs
- Celebrating their strengths, values, and what makes them unique

Practice example

To illustrate the practice principles, we have created composite stories based on the experiences of many EAs.

Jordan is 19 years old. He has just started his first semester studying nursing after a gap year travelling. He is nervous about making friends and learning in an unfamiliar environment. Jordan starts going to all the orientation events to try to make new connections. His parents think that he is staying out too late. They begin to clash with one another, and Jordan feels even more alienated. Fortunately, he has a great mentor who checks in weekly. They are good at asking questions and listening to what he is going through. Jordan has been struggling to find the time to attend church on Sundays because of his new part-time job and Uni schedule, but his mentor makes the time to connect during the week. Jordan feels supported and connected to others who care about him, even if he isn’t at church as often.

When we **meet EAs where they are** they feel seen and heard. They know that there are people who care about them as they search for who they are.

What comes next for me?

During emerging adulthood EAs find themselves responsible for the direction of their lives. Now that they’ve left school, they face choices and questions about the ‘Big 5’ markers of adulthood: education, employment, housing, relationships, and starting a family. EAs are making big decisions about these areas that will affect the rest of their lives. However, with many potential paths ahead of them, they can feel confused and pressured to decide which one to take. More than ever before, it is more complex to achieve these life markers. Career security is gone, house prices are expensive, and people are getting married and starting families much later in life. Participant 59 describes the tension between the excitement and challenge of choosing their path:

“It can be stressful thinking about career choices, which one’s the best to take and how it’s going to work out in the very end. So I guess that would be stressful but exciting I guess.”

Emerging adulthood is a time when EAs are trying to choose their path. It can be filled with excitement and hope for the future, uncertainty and hopelessness, or something in between. EAs need people to help them navigate these questions and ride the bumps along the way. As EAs begin taking steps on their path, we can **walk alongside them**, offering encouragement and support.

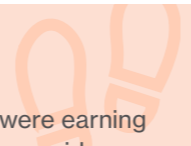
We can **walk alongside EAs** by:

- Providing practical support when they ask for help
- Asking them open questions about their life direction
- Helping them find peers who they can connect with
- Creating safe spaces where EAs can find acceptance and stability, or a ‘home base’

6. J. J. Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 479.

Practice example

Ash is 23 and has been working at a café since finishing high school. Ash initially loved that they were earning money, but now they feel like they are in a rut. They don't want to work in the café forever but have no idea what they want to do next. Ash brings these struggles up in a young adult small group. Ash feels encouraged by their peers, and an older group member starts connecting with Ash more regularly. This group member asks Ash about their skills, passions, and dreams for the future. As a result, Ash decides to study community services at TAFE and enjoys sharing with their small group each week. Some group members have also completed studies in the community services sector and helped Ash with some assignments.



How do I take responsibility?

Whilst EAs are navigating the same questions and decisions as those in generations past, they are doing so at a very complicated time in history. We know that Gen Zs are different from the generations before them. They have grown up in a digitally connected world but grapple with mental health challenges and loneliness. These mental health challenges can leave EAs struggling to feel in control of their lives. Technology has radically changed, as the hyper-connectivity of social media means that EAs are more aware of global issues. EAs feel the effects of climate change, international conflicts, discrimination, and economic disruption. For some, these personal and global challenges can leave them feeling overwhelmed or passive about their future. When asked about their hopes for the future, participant 57 responded:

"Hopes? Honestly, I don't know. To be honest, I haven't really thought of it. I don't really put my mind to it."

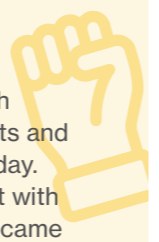
Whilst EAs are making choices about their futures, they face the task of becoming responsible for their lives and reactions to the world. Many EAs struggle to take agency or feel empowered to act and make changes for themselves and others. When EAs struggle to take responsibility, they can slip into a sense of hopelessness or even passive nihilism, where nothing really matters and you just try to get by. EAs can drift along or disengage from society. If we want to support EAs to take responsibility for their situations, we need to **empower them to take ownership** of their lives.

We can **empower EAs to take ownership** by:

- Helping them to articulate their values, beliefs, and goals
- Helping them to evaluate life decisions
- Supporting them to try new opportunities
- Being there for them if they make a mistake

Practice example

Riley is 23 and has just finished her apprenticeship as a mechanic. Riley has experienced mental health challenges since year 9 and struggles with the environment in the workshop. Riley lives with her parents and usually goes straight to her room. Her parents usually don't see her until she leaves for work the next day. Someone from church notices that they haven't seen Riley in a while and reaches out. As they connect with Riley, they hear her story and ask about her experiences as a mechanic. Riley shares that they only became a mechanic because they didn't do well at school and their dad's mate offered her the job. This person from church continues to meet with Riley and helps her talk about what is important to her and feel confident enough to make decisions in her life. Riley then decides she no longer wants to be a mechanic and starts exploring other options. Riley feels supported as she seeks new opportunities and continues connecting with her church friend. Riley begins to re-engage with the faith community, and one of the church members offers her a new job working in their warehouse.



What does life mean?

EAs no longer rely on their parents or closest relationships to define their beliefs, philosophies, and ideologies. EAs are formulating their own perspectives and searching for meaning in new ways that are more personal and applicable to their lives. As they explore different beliefs about the world, at the heart of their questions is a desire to know what will make their lives matter. EAs are not just looking for a creed to adhere to, but a purpose for their life. Many participants spoke about how a sense of helping others gave them this purpose. For example, Participant 40 told us:

"I want to become a positive influence on society, whether that be becoming a teacher or, I don't know what that will entail, but I want to be there for people. I want to be that one friend who was really crazy and funny, but was there to listen to people. I'm not big on politics, I'm not big on being a world athlete, I just want all of these people who feel like they're ignored, or obsolete, or even the people who do have attention, to feel like they matter."

For many EAs, this sense of purpose may have been with them their whole lives. Others may struggle with a sense of inadequacy about their contributions or feel like they have so little that they have nothing to give. But without purpose, EAs can feel directionless or struggle with motivation as challenges arise. As EAs explore the meaning of their lives, we can support them by **helping them discover purpose** in life.

We can **help EAs discover purpose** by:

- Helping them identify their skills and gifts
- Inviting them to contribute to their communities
- Asking them what they learn after a new experience
- Encouraging them to embrace their values, passions, and gifts to make a difference in the world

Practice example

Charlie is 26 and has just begun a family with her partner. Charlie has become the primary caregiver for their children and has struggled with the transition out of work, feeling isolated and disconnected from the world. Charlie heard of a parent group at a local church and begins attending. At the group they encourage participants to share about their passions and skills aside from caring for their children. Charlie told the group about her love of helping others and her experience as a teacher. The group encourages Charlie to contribute to the group, and she starts to help with activity ideas. Charlie feels like she is contributing to the world again and enjoys having a support network to talk about the new experience of being a parent with others.



Emerging adulthood is an exciting time of change. But it can also be a challenge, and EAs can feel lost in a wilderness of new choices and responsibilities. EAs need people to support them as they make their way. By applying the practice principles, we can support EAs to navigate emerging adulthood successfully. We can help them find their place in the world, discern their next steps, take responsibility for their lives, and make a positive difference in the world.

Finding a personal and applied faith

As we reflect on emerging adulthood as a phase of life, what does that mean for the faith and spiritual lives of EAs? EAs never have more freedom than during this time of their life. They have increased independence and responsibility and are beginning to work out what they believe for themselves. When it comes to their faith, they are no longer content just to believe what their parents and churches have told them to think, but start to take ownership of what they believe and how it affects their lives. As a result, EAs experience spirituality as much more of an open question for exploration. EAs are far less rigid and more eclectic than at other times across the lifespan.⁷ It is common for EAs to test new practices, search for new spiritual experiences, and, at times, reject their traditional spirituality.

Many EAs we interviewed felt that the churches they were connected to offered a form of spirituality that was irrelevant to their lives, naïve, and for some, even offensive. Before we roll our eyes at EAs seemingly in rebellion against faith communities, take some time to think back to your twenties. Was there ever a moment you disagreed with your church community? Didn't like their traditions and pushed for change? Perhaps as you look back you might realise that you only saw part of the picture, but by asking questions you were able to find answers you could trust. By pushing boundaries and testing ideas for themselves, EAs grow in their faith. Rather than suppress this exploration, we need to find ways to support EAs as they formulate what they believe.

To support EAs to find faith that is personal to them and applied in their lives, we must first consider the significant cultural shift that has taken place in how EAs perceive and engage in faith communities. EAs have shifted to having a more open mindset and value personal authority above all else. They reject traditional faith practices, are suspicious of institutions, and have an 'immanent' or physical understanding of the world (rather than transcendent or spiritual). As we consider these changes, we will examine how our practice principles can help faith communities respond positively to EAs' faith exploration.

Their open mindset

EAs are in a stage of life where they are exploring and testing what they believe. As a result, they tend to have a more open mindset that allows them to try out new faith practices and ideas. This open mindset is typically in contrast to faith communities, which tend to be more closed and rigid regarding doctrine and traditions. Participant 50 is an EA who is connected to a faith community and identifies as a Christian but has an open mindset:

"I'm a Christian, but if someone else believes in something or... I'm open to understand and learn about all other religions. I'm very open minded about that. Because my friends aren't religious and they've been in other religions before."

This openness might seem like doubts, immaturity, or rebellion, but if EAs cannot ask questions and find answers, their faith will never take root personally. They'll be saying the right words and acting the part but experiencing an internal disconnect. Like a plant whose roots don't grow deep,⁸ when the challenges of life come, faith will wither and die. If we want to support EAs search for a personal faith that makes sense to them, we must allow and embrace their questions instead of just telling them what they should believe. We must understand what is happening in their lives, not just how we want them to interact with us. We must **meet them where they are** on their faith journey.

We can **meet EAs where they are** by:

- Embracing their wandering and wondering
- Asking them questions about their faith story
- Teach them new faith practices
- Encouraging them to articulate their core beliefs

Case study

William is 23 years old and just started full-time ministry after feeling called by God and leaving his trade. William is described by many as zealous and pushing the status quo. From the very start of William's ministry, he has been pushing the boundaries. William has a heart for evangelising to the marginalised rather than being 'caged' in a church building. William starts to clash with senior leaders in the church denomination because of his unorthodox approach to ministry. William is seen as a troublemaker and relentlessly desires to change the church. When William can't do ministry as he feels God has called him, he leaves the church to start his own Christian ministry called the Christian Mission – later to be named The Salvation Army. This one's a real story!

Their view of personal authority

Due to emerging adulthood being a time of increased personal responsibility, it makes sense that EAs tend to see themselves as the holder of authority over their lives. They are guided by their feelings and intuitions. They're not just going to do something because someone told them to, but they need to understand why it matters. When it comes to matters of faith, this can clash with faith communities who traditionally see themselves as holders of spiritual authority. One EA described how they felt like they decided on their beliefs:

"I think one of the biggest problems with me is I'm a little bit of a sceptic. I am willing to learn and I will always take into account what other people think, but I'll develop my own perception of everything by taking apart what everyone else says."

EAs are going to trust their experiences and feelings about what to believe. But sometimes this can lead to a faith that justifies selfish behaviour or struggles to survive tough times. As EAs wrestle with what faith means, they don't need faith communities to tell them to behave and get in line, but a loving community that connects and grounds them. They need spaces that accept them and help them to be honest about their lives. They need people who will help them grow and change through their struggles. They need people to **walk alongside them** on their journey.

We can **walk alongside them** by:

- Exploring their questions and concerns with them
- Helping them find supportive mentors
- Encouraging them to find like-minded peers
- Asking questions about how what they believe affects their lives

Practice example

Jesse is 21 and has grown up going to church. Jesse regularly helps in kids' church and leads worship occasionally. Recently an internship position has come up at church, and some of the leaders think Jesse would be a great fit. Jesse isn't sure if this is the right fit for him, especially as he is wrestling with questions about his faith. The church leaders try to encourage Jesse by saying they really feel God has prompted them to give the role to him. Jesse is struggling because he knows he doesn't want the role but worries that he may not be following God's will. Jesse's friends pray with him and support him to make the decision that feels right for him. Jesse turns to his mentor, and they have coffee and talk about the decision. They also discuss some of Jesse's questions and doubts about their faith. Jesse decides the role isn't the right fit and respectfully declines the church leaders' offer.

7. T. W. Hall, D. C. Wang, and E. Edwards, "The Spiritual Development of Emerging Adults over the College Years: A 4-Year Longitudinal Investigation," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 8, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000051>.

8. Luke 8:4-15

Their suspicions of institutions

This generation of EAs is deeply suspicious of institutions, especially faith institutions. In the wake of the Royal Commission into abuse in church communities, moral failures from well-known faith figures, and stories of corruption and manipulation, it's understandable that EAs are suspicious of faith institutions. For many EAs, Christians don't have a reputation for love and kindness, but for judgment and prejudice. Participant 59 shared how the actions of their faith community challenged their faith:

"a lot of the older Salvos are very... They can be racist and not inclusive and homophobic and all that. So yeah, I suppose that puts a downer on it because the Salvos are meant to be really inclusive and I always tell everyone about how inclusive they are. And they don't actually act upon it."

EAs are hyper-aware of injustice, and when they experience it in faith communities, it can lead them to question their faith altogether. It's crucial that when

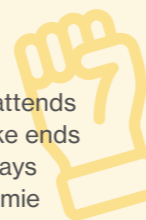
EAs have concerns about their faith community or the Church, we **empower them to take ownership of their faith**. When others fall short, we can encourage EAs to take responsibility. We can help them find the heart and meaning of faith for themselves. We can help them explore what is good about Christians and faith communities, even when those spaces disappoint us. We must also let them help us change and grow.

We can **empower EAs to take ownership of their faith** by:

- Encouraging them to explore and articulate their faith in their own words
- Helping them develop their values and beliefs, or what they are 'for' (not just what they are against)
- Providing new opportunities and experiences for EAs to live out their faith
- Empowering them to make decisions and play a part in faith communities

Practice example

Jamie is 19 years old and has moved away from home to study in the city. Jamie has found a church, attends regularly, and makes new friends. Jamie came from a small town where most people struggled to make ends meet. This is in contrast with their new faith community, where they have a lavish building and are always putting on church events. This contrast causes Jamie to question the use of the church's finances. Jamie feels that the church's money should be going to the needy in the community, not church events. Jamie considers leaving the church because of this and talks with someone they trust at the church. Together, they explore why Jamie feels this way and what values and beliefs are most important to them. After the conversation, the church member encourages Jamie to raise their questions with the church leaders. Jamie is nervous about talking to them but is encouraged by their peers in their small group. Jamie has a chat with the church leaders, and they listen and ask questions about Jamie's beliefs and background. The church leaders take on board Jamie's thoughts and encourage them to join the church's community outreach team. Jamie learns more about how the church uses their resources and continues to advocate for outreach and community service.



Their immanent worldview

Throughout history, people have interpreted the world through a spiritual lens. People considered nature supernaturally created and believed a higher power was looking over the world. Beginning with the Enlightenment and normalising during Modernism, a scientific view of the world has become more common.⁹ Many people today have no belief in a spiritual realm and hold that there is nothing beyond the physical, the observable, or the rational. For many EAs, however, this worldview leaves them struggling to understand and engage with pain and suffering in the world. Without deeper explanations or a sense of purpose or meaning, EAs can slip into nihilism and wonder, "If this is all there is to life, then what's the point?". Participant 23 highlighted the contrast between these worldviews:

"I feel so comfortable and strong in my faith, but then I'd be in the midst of a crazy storm in my life where I feel out of my depth and then I'm praying and I'm doing what

I feel as though helps me feel comfortable and calm. But then on the other hand, I'll have my family that tell me that's not real."

For EAs who view the world through an immanent worldview, faith communities can help them find meaning and hope. We can introduce a sense of wonder and direction to their lives. We can do this by **helping EAs discover purpose** through making a positive difference in the world and connecting it to a deeper spiritual meaning and purpose.

We can **help EAs discover purpose** in their faith by:

- Encouraging positive action in the world
- Exploring their passion, gifts, and talents
- Providing opportunities to serve
- Teaching the connection between our physical actions and spirituality

Practice example

Max is 24 years old. Max loves to help people, even from a young age. Max has a heart for people forgotten and on the margins of society. Max sometimes finds it challenging to connect fully with her church. She loves the opportunities to serve others practically but struggles to 'feel' anything spiritual when she goes to services. Max has felt increasingly alienated and is struggling to work out what faith means if she feels nothing. Max has a really good mentor that she meets up with. Her mentor helped introduce them to other Christians who value serving others. Through building these relationships, Max has learnt more about how the physical actions of serving, loving, and accepting others has spiritual significance. When she helps others, Max knows she is bringing God's Kingdom into the world. Max still doesn't 'feel' very supernatural in church but connects spiritually through serving others.

The way that EAs engage with church and spirituality has changed, as they have become spiritually open, trust their authority, distrust institutions, and view the world as purely physical. If the Church cannot adapt to this shift, EAs will continue their 'exodus' from faith. However, we

can apply our practice principles to these challenges to meaningfully engage EAs and help them develop a personal and applied faith. We can connect with EAs in new and exciting ways that respects their agency, while assisting them to find connection to faith and spirituality.



9. D.J. Seel, *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church* (HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2018).

Develop through faith transitions

In section 1, we unpacked practice principles for effectively engaging EAs. Section 2 explored how to support EAs to develop a personal and applied faith. In this final section, we will explore what happens when EAs experience challenges to their faith.

As noted throughout this report, emerging adulthood is a time of change. This is also true when it comes to EAs' experiences of faith. For many, it can be a time when their faith changes or transitions from one expression to another. Often, these transitions are a response to challenges to their faith. These transitions can look like changes to what they believe or how they practice it. It can look like disengagement from church or moving to a different faith community. It can look like deepening commitment or abandoning faith.

These faith transitions are perhaps what most come to mind when considering EAs' exodus from the Church. Think back to the examples of EAs leaving the Salvos we considered in the introduction. While each of these narratives connects to the life changes EAs experience, a deeper story of faith transition is also occurring. What external challenges are EAs facing that lead to these changes? What is going on in EAs' hearts and minds that changes how they think and feel about their faith?

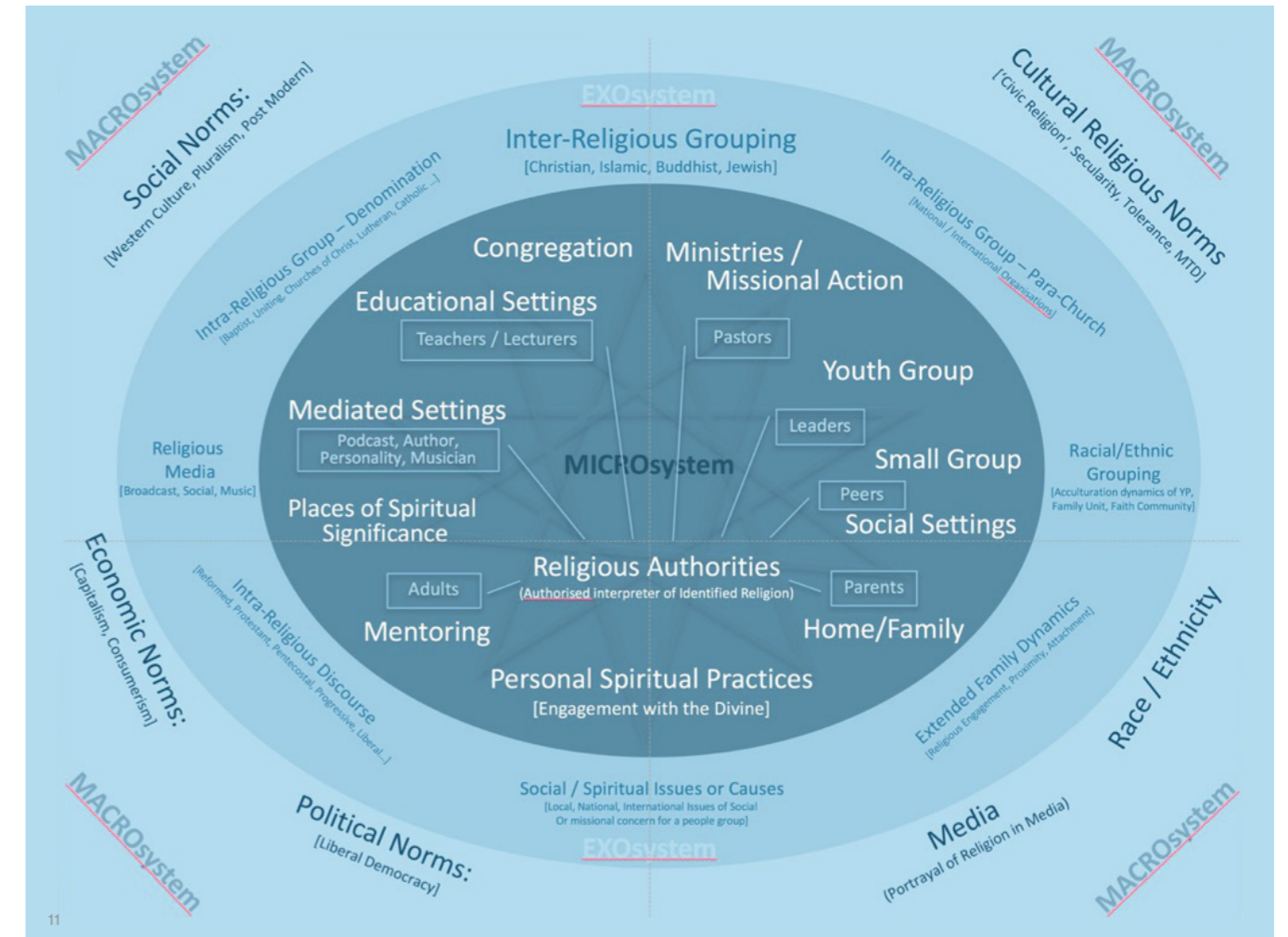
EAs inevitably seem to experience these changes and challenges to their faith. This presents an opportunity and challenge for people like us who seek to support EAs. The opportunity is that these faith transition periods are opportunities for EAs' faith to grow and develop. The challenge is that churches may need to adapt their practices and shift their focus to better support EAs whose faith is changing and maturing. The good news is that we heard from many EAs whose faith communities intentionally focused on helping them navigate their faith transitions, and these communities provide hope and an example for us to follow.

First, we need to understand what is going on for not only an EA, but all of us, when we experience challenges in our faith. To do this, we need to understand faith not as a set of beliefs or actions but as a 'system'.

Faith systems theory

While the truths of the Gospel never change, our experience of faith is never set in stone. It constantly interacts with our environment and our experiences. It changes and adapts to the new circumstances in our lives and challenges to our faith. This interaction is best understood by looking at Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecological Systems Theory'¹⁰. Bronfenbrenner highlighted five major spheres that impact our lives:

- Micro-system – our closest/daily relationships (family, friends, partners)
- Meso-system – the interaction of our closest relationships with each other (family interacting with friends)
- Exo-system – the social context in which a person lives (neighbourhood, community, workplaces, denominational groups)
- Macro-system – our culture and broader society (media, political systems, ideologies, cultural values)
- Chrono-system – Place in time (historical events, family change such as death, societal change)



All these environmental systems impact an individual's faith system. For example, an EA may have been raised in a Christian family (micro), and then starts dating a non-Christian (micro). Their family expresses their disappointment with their choice of partner, which brings conflict (meso). When the EA goes on social media, they see religious discourse about how churches aren't inclusive (exo) and that churches have become closed, traditional, and no longer relevant in society (macro). Then their grandmother, who they always felt they could talk to about faith, passes away (chrono). All these spheres interact with the EA's faith, causing their faith system to adapt as they experience these challenges.

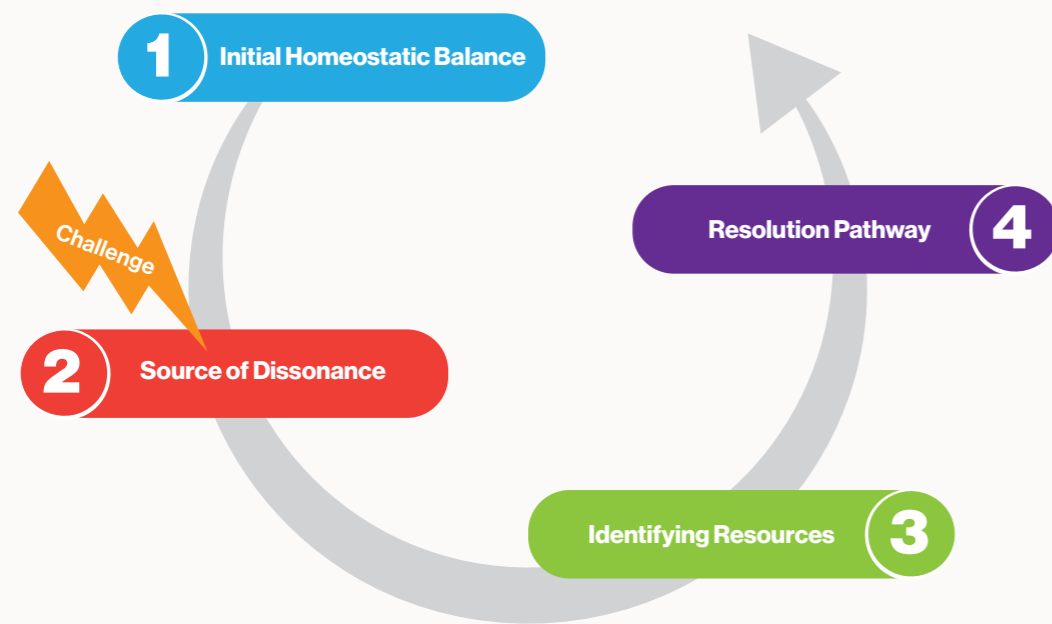
This systemic understanding may seem daunting, as so many influences on an EA's experience of faith are out of our control. How can we manage these spheres to stop EAs from experiencing challenges that may cause them to lose their faith? Unfortunately, we can't. It is impossible to cocoon our EAs away from the challenges life brings. But this is not bad news for their faith. Rowan Lewis built on Bronfenbrenner's work and found that it is because of these challenges that EAs' faith grows and becomes more personal and applied in their lives - if transitioned with support. His research led to a model of faith transitions.

10. Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Toward an experimental ecology of human development," *American Psychologist*, 32, no. 7 (1977).

11. Rowan Lewis, "Changing Faith: The Experience and Resolution of Disruptive Episodes in the Faith of Christian Emerging Adults" (University of Divinity, 2020), 124.

12. Lewis, "Changing Faith: The Experience and Resolution of Disruptive Episodes in the Faith of Christian Emerging Adults".

Lewis' model of faith transitions



13

In brief, an EA will have a set of beliefs and practices that make up their faith system as their 'baseline'. If an EA experiences a challenge to this baseline faith, it causes dissonance or discomfort to their status quo that must be resolved. The EA will then use various resources to help them resolve this challenge, and the resolution of this challenge to their faith will lead to adaptations or changes to their faith system. Lewis found four categories of change to faith, which he calls "resolution pathways":

- **Reaffirm** – reinforce the faith system they had.
- **Reconsider** – mostly keep the same faith system but adopt new practices or nuances from their experience.
- **Revise** – accept mostly new ideas and practices because of their experience but keep some aspects of their 'baseline' faith.
- **Reject** – completely getting rid of every aspect of their previous faith.

The most important point is not which resolution pathway the EAs take. Each resolution pathway can bring a more personal and meaningful faith in the lives of EAs (except for reject¹⁴). What is important is that EAs go through this process and resolve their challenge. If they don't, their faith effectively 'dies' and cannot move forward. This 'death' might look like faith being less relevant in young people's lives, or gradually slipping away from engagement and practice without a definite decision.

To avert this, we can apply the practice principles in specific ways relevant to their resolution pathway. Again, we are not trying to prevent change, as this will only cause faith 'death'. We are trying to provide the resources each EA needs to come to a helpful resolution. In this next section, we will explore the experiences of EAs on each resolution pathway and the resources that are most helpful to support them.

The Reaffirm Pathway

EAs on a reaffirm pathway were most likely to experience challenges as external 'attacks' on their faith. Maybe their friend questioned their beliefs, or they were exposed to a new idea at university or online that they disagreed with. These EAs tend to find safety in the original faith positions and faith communities. Participant 47 highlights the experience of an EA reaffirming their faith system:

"But then going back to prayer and connecting with people around the church solidifies that meaning, making me know that I definitely did make the right choice."

Faith communities are best suited to support EAs on a reaffirm pathway, as these EAs seek the firm foundation of practice and doctrine instilled in them by their faith community. They need encouragement, support, and a community they can belong to.

To support EAs on a reaffirm pathway, we can:

- Affirm their values and beliefs
- Facilitate like-minded peer groups
- Encourage their existing meaningful faith practices
- Highlight their purpose through strengths-based reflection

The Reconsider Pathway

EAs on a reconsider pathway are most likely to experience challenges as something feeling a bit off about their faith, like it doesn't quite fit. It is common for an EA on a reconsider pathway to ask questions like "What does this mean?" or "How does this work?" These EAs need more nuance and depth to their faith to help them make sense of the challenges they face. Participant 24 reflected on their experience of COVID-19 and how their perspective changed through a reconsideration:

"[I] realised later, that God's doing something in this. So, rather than praying it away, I was praying, God use this as an opportunity to do whatever He wants to do."

For those on a reconsider pathway, we need to help them find new tools and understanding of faith that makes sense for them. We need to help expand their faith beyond the possibilities they've known and find new ways for them to experience faith to find their fit.

To support EAs on a reconsider pathway, we can:

- Ask questions to help them clarify what challenge they are facing
- Introduce them to more nuanced education and ideas about faith
- Encourage them to take ownership of their faith
- Provide practical opportunities for them to experience how faith impacts their day-to-day life

The Revise Pathway

EAs on a revise pathway are seen as the boundary pushers. They ask complex questions, are critical of the faith community, and have eclectic expressions of faith. Participant 22 represents an EA with an eclectic spirituality, who is also still searching for solid foundations of what they are 'for':

"And I have done some soul searching, if that's what it's called. And it's led me to believe there is a higher power out there and I have had signs. Like I've said, "If God is real, do this, or let this happen," and it's happened. So, I'm like, "Okay."

EAs on a revise pathway can benefit people who listen to them and help them identify what they are 'for' rather than just what they are 'against'. It can be difficult for faith communities to engage with boundary pushers, but finding people who can help them experiment with their 'radical' ideas can keep them connected to their faith instead of walking away.

To support EAs on a revise pathway, we can:

- Encourage their critical questions rather than shy away from them
- Help them find mentors who can accept their experimentation and provide guidance
- Encourage new practices that they find meaningful and can incorporate into their lives
- Help them develop tools to articulate their values and beliefs to define what they are 'for'

The Reject Pathway

EAs on a reject pathway can be those converting to Christianity (rejecting their non-belief or another religion) or deconversion (rejecting their current faith). There are different resources to support these two categories. It's important to note that we don't want EAs to reject Christianity, but for some, it is the path that they have chosen at this time. We mustn't burn our bridges with them as we support them because faith transitions occur many times during our lives. Perhaps later in life, they might reconsider their decision. If we burn bridges, there is little chance we will ever see them again.

To support EAs on the rejection pathway into Christianity (conversion), we can:

- Ask about their faith story and help them to articulate it
- Demonstrate trustworthiness through welcoming and accepting spaces
- Introduce and support them as they try new Christian practices
- Empower them to participate in the faith community

To support EAs on a rejection pathway out of Christianity (deconversion), we can:

- Listen to their frustrations with compassion and empathy
- Help them find new spaces and communities to help support them
- Encourage them to find new meaning-making frameworks for how they engage in the world
- Help them to reconstruct what is important in their life

13. Lewis, "Changing Faith: The Experience and Resolution of Disruptive Episodes in the Faith of Christian Emerging Adults", 190.

14. The 'reject' resolution may even be positive, depending on the original belief they are rejecting. For example, some young people might grow up in toxic faith environments, believing that God's love is conditional, and a challenge to this belief might lead to a more positive and healthy faith.

Practice example

Alex is 22 years old and studying to be a teacher. Alex grew up attending church, but their family has stopped going, so Alex goes alone. Alex is starting to become dissatisfied with their church. They feel less connected because of their family, but they also begin to find themselves disagreeing with the things they hear. It doesn't seem to match their experience. They also find the services a bit boring and irrelevant. The church leaders notice Alex disengaging but aren't sure how to help, as they were involved in a conflict with Alex's family. A chaplain from a local Salvation Army Youth Service attends the congregation and takes an interest in Alex. They catch up and have long discussions about faith, life, and everything in between. This chaplain helps Alex articulate what they believe and points out how it connects to ideas in Scripture and Christian tradition (even though it sounds slightly different from what's said on Sunday). The chaplain invites Alex to help them run a discussion group at the Youth Service, where Alex talks openly about their faith and what it means for them. Alex feels more connected to their faith than they have in a long time.

Faith challenges are inevitable for EAs, and if ignored, will result in faith 'death'. EAs will be left wandering in a wilderness of confusion and disappointment. But if these challenges are resolved well, they result in faith growth and development. It is also important to note that EAs may experience many of these challenges and resolutions and that as we support them through these transitions, we can teach them how to grow and develop and reduce the risk of faith 'death'.

When we notice an EA struggling with a challenge to their faith, if we can identify the kind of resolution pathway an EA is on, we can provide them with the best resources to resolve and grow from their challenge. When we apply the practice principles to support the resolution pathway the EA is on, faith communities can become a helpful resource rather than a hindrance to EAs' faith.

The Promised Land

There is currently an exodus of EAs from faith communities, and it can feel daunting for the future of the Church. But in Scripture, the Exodus was a defining moment of God's love and redemption for His people.¹⁵ What if we understood EAs' 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 EAs, 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 embrace EAs on their journey in life and faith, we can go with them through the wilderness of questions and challenges.

We can find those who are lost and meet them where they are. Rather than abandon EAs to the wilderness, we can walk alongside them, learning together on the way. We can empower EAs by empowering them to take ownership over their lives and faith, helping them to choose to follow Jesus as they find their path. We can celebrate them as they discover their purpose and become people who will lead others into the promised land of hope and thriving. If emerging adults are experiencing an exodus, let us embrace the possibility and potential of the promised land they may find on the other side.

¹⁵. Exodus 3:15-22

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