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How can churches reach out to young adults in this technologically filled world?

Jocelyn A. Sideco | Jan. 28, 2013 Young Voices

In a reality of smartphones, streaming on-demand videos, cloud storage reliability and accessibility, young adults hold in tension the pace of their daily lives with the longing for a whole identity as an individual and as someone within a community. Demanding work or extreme sports have reaped the benefit of their energy for commitment, identity-shifting developmental stage, and community-seeking, "check-in" necessitating social location.

This is what I heard on a young adult retreat [1] held Jan. 11-13 at the Jesuit Retreat Center [2] in Los Altos, Calif.

Born from an idea that a couple of graduates from the Jesuit School of Theology [3] had, what began as a journey supporting an imagined and personal desire started with six attendees, then grew to 18, then 22, then finally 30 just hours before the retreat was to begin.

Retreat attendees came from as far north as Sacramento, as far south as Monterey Bay and as far east as Tennessee, arriving at the edge of the West Coast to overlook and contemplate the beautiful San Francisco Bay.

Teachers and counselors, Silicon Valley innovators, biotech professionals and artists heard the echo of their search for community, understanding, comfort and love in the conversations around prayer and spirituality alive in the silence, the small faith-sharing groups, experiences of communal prayer and communal meals: people being people, coming to a peaceful understanding of themselves, God and how God desperately desires to be in their lives to offer love.

The attendees' desires to participate fully in the weekend particularly moved me. People dove in and took refuge in the community of deeper thinkers, feelers and followers. They tried on new ways to be with God through a variety of contemplative practices -- from "Our Father" yoga to *lectio divina*, walking meditations, Ignatian contemplation, the Divine Office and the simplicity of silence. They entered into practices of Centering Prayer and the Examen together. They ate together, they laughed together, they listened together.

And yet the tension I continue to feel is that our church is limited in the space we can offer to our young adults. I am stuck in a place of wanting to create more room but hitting the concrete walls of years of tradition and formation built by previous generations' devotion to education and their Christian communities. More established communities of faith and religious organizations must provide both stability to a sea of seekers and hospitality that is willing to be transformed and mutually welcomed into the lives of these younger versions of renewal and possibility.

How can churches be places that celebrate the tension of young adulthood? With its disappointments, surprises, insecurities and uncertainties, the harsh reality of life is something many young adults are faced with, and not what they expected.

It's like what happened to the 30-year-old Jesus. He grew up in an uncommon household, baptized by family, and God was pleased. Then he was tempted in the desert before significantly contributing to the healing of the people around him.

Our young adults know love and still are thrown into situations of anxiety and despair, doubtful commitments and true questions of faith and longing. They are critical of the world and, more now than ever, critical of themselves.

Let our church continue to be a community of trust, openness, healing and God's grace. Let our church be places filled with every age of God's children, from the experienced to the experiencing, the youthful and the courageous. Let our church's contemplation, or "long, loving look at the real" (according to the Jesuit theologian Walter Burghardt), celebrate the complicated position and posture of the faithful: open-handed, open-armed, open-hearted, like the 30-year-old Christ born of family, formed in the desert and journeying to his passion and extending new life to others.

To all those who attended the retreat: Thank you for your faith. Thank you to the staff at the Jesuit Retreat Center for your openness and support. Thank you to the rest of the team -- Michael Downs, Jesuit Fr. Radmar Jao, Kyle Lierk and Jessica Mueller -- for being contemplative companions on this journey.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit www.contemplativesinaction.org for more information.]

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