

# Crossing the Great Divide: The Journey into Faithful Adulthood

By Vicki Sairs

Rosedale Bible College President Dan Ziegler said his goodbyes to conference at Friday evening's Christian Education Program. As a parting gift, he shared what he discovered while researching the educational and faith choices of emerging adults in the CMC for his doctoral dissertation.

Dan focused his research on adults aged 26-32 who started out in the Conservative Mennonite Conference. He examined their educational choices and their later involvement in church and community service as adults via an anonymous survey. (You can find out more about the results in RBC's August *Beacon* feature, or contact Dan at [dziegler@rosedale.edu](mailto:dziegler@rosedale.edu) for conversation or a copy of his dissertation.)



Explaining that "emerging adulthood" is a relatively new term, Dan shared the results of scholarly research on this group in society at large from both secular and church scholars. Here are the high points:

They haven't rejected faith in general, but their belief system is rather vague and amorphous: Christian Smith, in The National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR), dubbed this view "moralistic therapeutic deism," in which "the ultimate goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself, and . . . God does not particularly need to be involved in one's life, except when a problem needs resolving."

Many are leaving the church, and many are rejecting Christianity, particularly evangelical Christianity. To explain this movement, Dan cited David Kinnaman's books *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* and *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church*.

Those leaving the church believe that evangelical Christianity is hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental. They also believe that the church is: overprotective when it comes to the acceptance of creative and cultural engagement; shallow and boring; anti-science; repressive (particularly in sexual mores); too exclusive; and not a place where doubts are allowed or entertained.

What about our CMC emerging adults? Dan said, "Take it from one who has spent the past eight years getting to know CMC emerging adults: They are not exempt from the forces affecting their non-CMC peers." They are facing many of the same challenges, and asking many of the same questions as those around them are asking.

"They are quite post-modern in their thinking," said Dan, "which means they have a very relativistic view of faith and meaning, and they're not nearly as fond of 'locked-down' answers and formulas about faith as we are."

They value questions often as much as answers. "They're cool with some degree of mystery, and when it comes to faith, they wonder about things we didn't let ourselves or weren't allowed to wonder about."

Dan found a high rate of church involvement among the young people in his survey (79% attend church regularly). Thinking about emerging adults in general and CMC emerging adults in particular, it is clear that there is much to be encouraged about, he said.

"They are open to spirituality and the deep mysteries of God. They are inquisitive, positive and hopeful, unbounded by the pragmatism that besets their elders."

They lead with their heart, and "may be open to the Spirit's leading in new ways." By and large, they are not a rebellious generation, but kindhearted and open. CMC young adults are engaged in church to a high degree, both in attendance and leadership, and most of them have experienced the faith grounding of Christian education.

But Dan also pointed out the challenges that loom for this generation. Many of them in the general population have become cynical about evangelical Christianity and are leaving the church in significant numbers; many are "beset by a sometimes debilitating combination of post-modern relativism and individualism that affects their ability to believe in truth, even the truths of almighty God."

In any case, he said, "They are God's dearly beloved children, created to be conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus and to do the work of their Father in Heaven. And with the Spirit's help, the future of the church is in their hands."

In order to nurture and encourage them across the great divide into faithful adulthood, the church must learn to first understand them, said Dan. "This means understanding what they are longing for in their faith and in their churches."

