

Good morning, y'all. I'm not Southern, but I like to say y'all. So good morning, y'all.

Christianity is not going to die. Amen to that, right? Phyllis Tickle says it's just birthing out a new tributary to the river. Christianity is reconfiguring she utters. It's going through another adolescence. It's going to come out a better and more mature adult. There's no question about that.

The conversation that I get to have and lead us all in this morning, is not about the church necessarily, but it's about Jesus. And Jesus is people.

My name is Kris Sledge, as already was uttered, and I am twenty-three, a current seminarian, and aspiring pastor. I will actually be licensed on Saturday, and will take my first appointment July 1. So this is my last laity session. I am excited about that.

For the past few years I have served as a director of young adult ministries and pastoral assistant at one of our local congregations. And for that time I was responsible in engaging and asking questions about young adults, and how we connect them with our community of faith. And so for two years, I was paid to ask this question, "How do we get more young adults in our local church?" Everyday I thought about this question. And then more questions arose, such as, why don't my peers find it important to be a part of a faith community. What's wrong with this church? What's wrong with my programming and thoughts?"

Now I am sure – I'm not sure if I will answer any of those questions this morning. I am not even sure if I will get to that. But these were questions that kept me awake late at night. And these questions became instrumental in my work at that local church, and really instrumental in my thinking of this presentation this morning.

So I want to ask you a couple of questions, so this will require some engagement. So if this question applies to you, I want you to raise a hand. Let's start with a really, really easy one: How many of you are at Messiah College right now? I just wanted to make sure you are awake and really willing to engage.

Let's look to the next question. How many of you personally know a young adult between the ages of eighteen and thirty? I think that's all of us. How many of you personally know a young adult who has dropped out of the Christian faith, or have left the church? A lot of us.

And now the final question: How many are really saddened by this reality. All of us.

The American church is experiencing a problem, and it impacts us. It impacts parents, it impacts church leaders, and parents. While this problem is not new, I think the implication is new, and it's unlike any other time in history. The truth is, young adults are leaving the church. These people, these young people, who were once actively engaged in our youth ministry and our worship, where are they? We don't know. They've left.

So my initial go-to reaction to this is really to scream. And then to look into the sky and say, why, I don't really get it at all. And then I read books. And then I read the many blog posts that

are out there these days with, like, the five new ways to get young adults. And then more and more I get confused. I get discouraged, because none of these things really seem to get at the heart of the issue.

So now the reality is, I'm a Millennial, I'm a young adult. But I've always, always, always been part of the church. This is how I really will discredit myself. I have never chosen to distance myself from the church. Yet I think my story resonates with many of you. It feels like we've always grown up in the church. So for some of us, we don't understand why a young person would choose to leave the church. Yet I can think of numerous peers, friends, and youth group buddies who don't attend church. And then I continue to utter these words, 'Well, (now this is personal) why have my friends left?'

And so last year at Annual Conference, I was a part of a young adult presentation on Friday morning, where we continued and had this conversation. And I shared with you some of these statistics. And I just want to reiterate them for a moment. Such as 61 percent of young adult Protestant ages 18 to 29 have dropped out of attending our church. So 61 percent of our youth group members, once they graduate, are no longer active in the church. Or 57 percent of all young adult Christians say that they are less active in the church compared to the age of 15. And then finally, 75 percent of young adults, those who grew up in the faith and those who did not, are currently not attending church on a frequent basis.

So the first reality that I have to share this morning is, we struggle. We don't know what it really means to engage with young adults today. So these were the beginning sentiments that began the conversation last year and that will continue this morning. My hope is to offer some thoughts, but I need to have a major disclaimer. This is a conversation. A continual conversation that we will have for years and years and years. So the few thoughts that I will offer are just thoughts. That's all they are. And I hope that you will just think about them and apply them to your own ministry context and church.

Because the reality is, all of us at some point have asked that question: I wonder why more young adults aren't choosing to attend my church? And if you've not said that, you've probably thought of it at some point in your minds. For many years the church has often looked to youth ministry. We would hire a director of youth ministries and believe that in some way there is a connection between adolescence and teenage, and then the young adult age. Yet over the years, I think we've seen this widening gap between these two age groups; between a youth, between young adults, and then adulthood.

In adolescence, students have parental and institutional support. They have parents. They have youth groups. They have sports teams. They are really kind of, they're really pampered well. There's a lot of support for them. And then there is young adults. They don't have parents around, and they are just left to figure out life on their own.

So I want to offer a new term for a moment that I've read for the last couple of years, that I think really resonates with this age group. And I want to offer the language 'emerging adulthood.' I think the term emerging adulthood really showcases what this age group is like. For example, half of a century ago, so, fifty years ago, many young people were anxious to get out of high

school to marry, to settle down, have children, and start a long-term career. Now, many emerging adults will spend almost a decade, ten years, between high school graduation and marriage, exploring their new-found freedom.

There's there is this clear shift over the last fifty years in attaining traditional adult milestones, such as leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having children.

So listen to this for a moment. According to the research network on transitions to adulthood and public policy, more than two-thirds of young adults in 1960 had accomplished all five life events; those five that I just uttered. But by the age of 30, however, in 2000 less than half of females and less than one-third of males had attained these same life goals. Now I can remember the day when this became so clear to me. I was riding in the car with my beloved grandma named Nancy. So Nancy and I were in the car together, and we were going with my parents to my sister's house in Philadelphia. And I looked around, like, Gram, what was it like for you to be eighteen? What was it like for you? And this is what she said: She said, "Well, your Grandpa got me pregnant in high school, we had your Aunts, he left for war, then I figured it out on my own." And I just remember staring at her, because I think I was twenty-one at the time, and I had attained none of those things. And I thought I had no idea what life was really all about. And then from that moment, I have done research over the last couple of years. Really, what is the difference between when I grew up and when my grandparents or my parents grew up? Because clearly, times are different.

There is this major shift in the thinking and just the life of a Millennial, of a young adult. I think whether we like it or whether we don't like it, we as the church must think about it; must understand the implications and then try to find a future together.

So before I give you any specific thoughts, I want to just highlight a few interesting shifts that I have noticed through some research and through life experience between my grandparents age, and between mine.

So let's start with the first one, psychological issues. With the instability that is associated with this stage of life, it is not surprising that anxiety is a common emotion among young adults. Young adults experience fear, depression, emotional paralysis, while struggling with various addictions and a desire to escape the reality. Now listen to this quote. It comes from the book "College of the Overwhelmed: the Campus Mental Heal Crisis." They say that in the last decade, the diagnosis of the number of students on one college campus doubled of those people being diagnosed with depression and suicidal tendencies. The number of students, college students, our college students, taking stress-relieving medicines rose from ten to twenty-five percent, making anti-depressants the top drug prescribed for college students today over the birth control pill and acne medicine. When identity is perceived as a personal project of self-development, these high stakes drive some emerging adults to stress-filled achievement or others to failure-driven despair. So the first one is, there is some psychological issue that is different.

Well the next one is fun – marriage. I am not married, praise be to Jesus. Over the past fifty to sixty years, there has been a notable shift in the time when one gets married. You've probably

recognized this. In 1970 four out of five adults ages twenty-five to twenty-nine were married. So that's ninety percent. In 2010 less than half of this age group were married. The average age for a male to get married today is twenty-seven point five, and for a woman, twenty-five point nine. And so some can say that this is caused by many different things. Some could say that a fear of marital failure, that with a culture where high divorce rates are so prevalent. Like fifty percent of marriages end in divorce, something like that. Maybe delayed marital commitment can be seen as a wise safeguard against disappointment and heartbreak of a broken family, or, maybe our cultural tolerance of premarital sexuality. Because we can recognize that the cultural tolerance of premarital sexuality relationships are a result of the availability of reliable birth control methods. So now, marriage is no longer viewed as a precursor to sexual intimacy, which allows for individuals to delay marriage to a more convenient time. I also wonder if marriage is delayed because of higher education, which is our next one.

In today's world, young adults are required in most cases to pursue higher education in order to enhance career opportunities, and earn a solid income. As a result, there is a natural increase in college attendance. In 1960 about thirty-eight percent of high school graduates attended college. That number nearly doubled, jumping to seventy percent in 2013. It's even more noticeable for women. For the most part in the twentieth century, women were discouraged from attending college. You may remember those days. And it wasn't until the late 80s that women exceeded men in attending college. So today, fifty-seven percent of undergraduate in America are female. As a result of emerging adults commitment to higher education, other responsible things and priorities such as pursuing a career, getting married, and parenting are naturally being delayed.

Then we have identity exploration. Fifty to sixty years ago, researchers looked at teenagers and adolescence of finding out about this young age group. But over those years we've noticed that really identity development doesn't happen in high school, but really happens in college and post-college. So they are exploring the ideas about education, vocation, romantic relationships, and really, religious beliefs. So this is a time for them where they ask who they are, what they think, what they really want to think, and really what they want in life. They do this all without the support of family, often without the support of our churches. So they do this on their own.

Then we know that this age group is a self-focused age. I think I've heard lots of different statistics or things that say we are a really egotistical age group. But I think this comes from this is the first time in our life where we are no longer dependent upon our parents. So we are trying to understand what it is like to have our own autonomy in our lives. They experience freedom from social obligations and expectations, and desire to be self-sufficient. You can clearly tell I love statistics, because this is one that was really captivating to me. Emerging adults ages nineteen to twenty-nine spend more of their leisure time alone than any other persons, except for the elderly. More of their time in productive activities such as school and work, are done alone than any other age group. So we really are a real self-focused age group.

Then the final one is the age of possibilities. We live in a world that says you can be anything you want to be and you can do anything you want to do. This is an age of possibilities for vocation and for religious belief. But I think that one that we really care about, or the most one that we should care about, is the shift in spirituality. It's almost a complex issue. Young adults are exploring various avenues to attain a level of spirituality that they desire. For many, they

experience a decline in church involvement. Such as a building and a church, they choose to distance themselves from that. But on other hands, there is this level of growth in spirituality that young adults are really looking at spirituality to center them, to really be the thing that keeps them whole.

According to the study by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, it says that students from diverse institutions, from colleges, from faith institutions, that there is an increase, there is a high level of spiritual interest as they explore life and the meaning of life. For out of five college students claim to have an interest in spirituality, and believe in the sacredness of life. And two out of three students state that spirituality is their sense of joy. So on one hand, we see there is this rise in spirituality. That young adults want to integrate the divine spirituality in their life. But there is a decrease in our congregations, and our level of engagement with them. So we are left with this great paradox: What do we do? What does this all mean?

So the first question I have to ask is this: What are the ramifications of asking these big questions?

We are blessed to have faithful young adults who have never left. There are people like me who just find church to be fun and engaging. So we are still there, praise be to God. And yet we can utter names that have left. But what is the cost for us to ask those questions? What is the cost for you and I as church leaders to really be willing to authentically have a deep desire to really wrestle with these questions?

Often times when we ask a church, when I ask a church, what is your role, what is your hope to reach young adults? I think I often get confused looks. We don't know what to do; I don't know what to do. I have a few thoughts of how to move forward, and it really stems from this question, how do we get more young adults in our church?

The first on is to realize that the church isn't going to die. God is going to do something beautiful in the midst of this. But I wonder if the first thing that we should do is this: have deep conversations with young adults. I think, like was uttered a little bit before me, that we can no longer expect our worship services to find young adults. To gravitate, to bring young adults back to our church. Rather, how many people are we willing to intentionally invest in, in our community?

I asked John before I started, how many people are here this morning, and he said over five hundred. What would it look like for all of us, five hundred of us, to connect with one young adult outside of the church? No strings attached. Not wanting them to be part of our faith community. Not even wanting them to be in our churches. But what would it look for us to have one conversation with a young adult outside of our church? Think about it. You probably run into a young adult at some point in your world. Now the beautiful thing is, I don't think this has to be an age. You don't have to have a twenty-three-year-old connecting with a twenty-three-year-old. Rather I think the deepest connections I have with church people are people who are older than me, who are wiser, who have more life experience who can really speak into my life.

So what would it look like to have one conversation? And if you are really ambitious, what would it look like to have two conversations? Because, imagine, we come back here next year, and we've had five hundred conversations with new young adults in our community, or two. We could have a thousand new conversations with young adults in our community, not for our church, but really for Jesus, can to connecting with Jesus' people.

So the next thought is this. What if we establish a deep connection with those people who are already in our churches who haven't left? A number of researchers, I mean a number, like all of them, would say that adolescence who had relationships, deep relationships with adults in the church are more likely to stay connected post-high school graduation. That's my story, right. I am still in the church because people cared for me while I was going to college and beyond.

So it doesn't have to be someone of youth connecting. More and more it's not a program or even an event that make people stay, but it's people. It's us as church leaders. So what is our mentoring, what are our deep intentional relationships look like with those who are off at college, who come home and? What would it look like to have a mentoring program, where I am connected with someone who I can connect with at any moment, who I know is praying for me, so when I come home they take me out for lunch? They take me out for dinner to see how I am doing just as Kris. Maybe we'll talk about the church, maybe we'll talk about faith, but that they really cared for me.

Then there is something I came across a little while ago. I am really interested in seeing how this works. How do we envision inter-generational ministry? Imagine a worship service that engages all ages on a weekly basis. Not because the pastor shares a cute story that everyone finds humorous, but because all ages are involved in the surface. A child helping and leading a responsive reading. A teen assisting with delivering a children's message. The worship team with individuals of all people represented. All are welcome only because they used their gifts, but to use them here and now because they are God's people.

It doesn't have to be just worship, but it could be anything. Invite youth to be part of an administrative council or any other committee, because this is what is really important to me. It's not because of any of these one things that will keep a young adult or help connect the young adults, rather it's the relationships that are formed when an adult is teaching a child or a youth where that passage is located in the Bible. Or the conversations that take place at worship team or choir practice, or youth sharing a vision or a suggestion with the entire visioning council or ad council. I think it's the intentional combined vision of the entire congregation, realizing that everyone has an important role in the life and the body of the church.

The reality is we need one another. I need you and you need me. I want to look into the faces of old and young, rich and poor of all different walks of life. I want to see Jesus in them, and I want someone to see Jesus in me.

So what does it look like to create new places of worship or to think about legacy? Maybe my church can't reach a young adult in this age, but would it look like for me to be a legacy thinker? To create money or funds or a space for young adults to gather and think about legacy? I think the most important thing is for us to stay committed to our own faith.

So tomorrow, Audrey Wilder, our director of young people's ministry, is offering two sessions in the afternoon. The two sessions are titled "Igniting Young Leaders" and "Channeling Your Fire." If you are a young adult and you want to find out how to deeply connect with your church, go to the one that's "Channeling Your Fire." And if you want to continue this conversation or ask a panel of young adults more questions, the conversation will really happen tomorrow in the afternoon. And that one is called "Igniting Young Leaders." I would really encourage you, even if you just want to go and listen, or learn to go and be a part of those sessions tomorrow, because I think we have the ability as the church. We are in a unique time in the life of the church, a pivotal time, where we are listening, where I am learning, where you are learning, to be open to what would it look like to be in a relationship with all people, including young adults. I think we have the ability to unite as one as the body of Christ.

So as we transition to the next speaker, I want you to turn to the person next to you, so don't move, don't even talk for more than thirty seconds, because I think I am already over time. But I want you to ask this question to the person: Who are you going to continue this conversation with? Who in your sphere of influence or a church leader or a pastor, who do you desire to really engage deeply about the young adult conundrum and the young adult world for the church. Because I am convinced that God is doing something new among us, and that our church will continue to be faithful to Jesus Christ in this day and this world. So we are all in this together. Amen.