

Key Characteristics of the Seasons of Adulthood

(From Chapter Eight in *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*)

Key Characteristics of Young Adults

- Young adults are exploring their identity: trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work, developing an individual sense of autonomy, and stabilizing a self-concept and body image.
- Young adults are “tinkering”—putting together a life from the skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand.
- Young adults are developing and maintaining intimate relationships with trust, love, and caring.
- Young adults are transitioning from their family of origin toward establishing independence in living arrangement, finances, career, and other aspects of their lives.
- Young adults are differentiating self without repudiating or replacing their family of origin—sorting out emotionally what they take from their family of origin, what they leave behind, and what they will create for themselves.
- Young adults are developing a career and occupational identity and working to establish a work-life balance.
- Young adults are adjusting to the expectations and responsibilities of the “adult” world.
- Young adults—many but not all—are committing to a marital partner, defining and learning the roles of married life.
- Young adults—many but not all—are having children and becoming parents, establishing a new family with its own rules, roles, responsibilities, values, and traditions, and developing parenting roles and skills.
- Young adults are engaged in a theological reevaluation and reinvention—regardless of their affiliation or involvement with actual religious institutions—synthesizing tacit beliefs (synthetic-conventional faith) and revising implicit beliefs in light of stepping out of their social system of origin (individuated-reflective faith).

Key Characteristics of Midlife Adults

- Midlife adults are continuing to seek a definition for self that is now focused on “Who am I with you?” Relationships take on deeper meaning and compel them to explore how the self is adjusted in the context of committed family, work, and civic relationships that have become so important at this stage of life. They are parents, colleagues, leaders, team members, and more.
- Midlife adults are anchoring themselves in a particular way of life filled with stable commitments and relationships.
- Midlife adults are focused on maintaining intimate relationships with other midlife adults while developing the capacity for new kinds of relationships with those younger and older than themselves. The midlife adult is involved in the generative task of caring and guiding the next generations (including children and grandchildren) and with caring for the older generation.
- Midlife adults are building extensive personal networks for themselves and their families—traditional networks around their families, coworkers, churches, and other organizations, supplemented by digital social networks that allow more frequent conversations. Midlife adults are striving for a healthy balance in their personal and social networks.
- Midlife adults are evaluating their lives at its midpoint and often growing beyond the pressures of the present moment toward an appreciation of the deeper meanings symbolized in religious tradition. Time for refreshment and reflection supports the active

expression of generativity and care. Midlife adults are reflecting on “What are we spending and being spent for? What commands and receives our best time and energy? What causes, dreams, goals, or institutions are pouring out our life for? To what or whom are we committed in life and in death? What are our most sacred hopes, our most compelling goals, and purposes in life?”

- Midlife adults are engaged in family life and parenting children, adolescents, and, often, young adults. They are allowing for the increasing independence of adolescents while maintaining enough structure to foster continued family development. They are adjusting patterns of family communication, traditions, and celebrations for adolescent and young adult children. Many are adapting to an empty-nest household and redefining the marriage relationship and roles now that children are no longer at home full-time.
- Midlife adults are seeking a religion that emphasizes personal identity, religious experience, and a quest for religious identity in community. They want a religion emphasizing the sensual and experiential, combining the sacred and the profane, and incorporating text, image, music, dance, and the body as venues for the expression of religious beliefs. They insist on an authentic religious experience that acknowledges the ambiguities, trials, and successes of life.

Key Characteristics of Mature Adults

- Mature adults are addressing the challenge of generativity (or its failure, stagnation)—establishing and guiding the next generation, striving to create or nurture things that will outlast them through caring for others, and creating and accomplishing things that make the world a better place.
- Mature adults approaching older adulthood are addressing the challenge of integrity—reflecting on the life they have lived and coming away with either a sense of fulfillment from a life well lived or a sense of regret and despair.
- Mature adults are experiencing physical changes and decline, coming to terms with the cognitive changes related to a changed perspective on time and a personal, existential awareness of death. They are seeking to stay physically and mentally fit.
- Mature adults are thinking about, planning for, and disengaging from their primary career occupations, launching second or third careers, and developing new identities and new ways to be productively engaged.
- Mature adults are retiring from full-time work and planning for sufficient income that will last into their later adult years.
- Mature adults are blending (part-time) work, volunteering and civic engagement, pursuit of new interests, travel, and their role as grandparent into a new lifestyle for the mature adult years.
- Mature adults are concerned about having adequate health care into later life and providing for their own or a spouse/partner’s long-term care needs.
- Mature adults are establishing new patterns of relating to spouses, children, siblings, parents, and friends; and leaving some existing relationships and beginning new ones.
- Mature adults are experiencing changes in the marital relationship now that parenting responsibilities are minimal, developing adult-to-adult relationships between grown children and their parents, becoming grandparents, realigning relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren, and caring for the older generation and dealing with disabilities and death.
- Mature adults are moving to the very core of their faith tradition, while appreciating other religious traditions. They are seeking a self-reflective quest for individual wholeness, a search for depth and meaning, as well as guidance for living one’s life. They tend to recognize that spirituality must be cultivated through sustained practice. Spirituality will be a significant aspect of the remainder of their lives.

- Mature adults seek to be in service to others that is mission driven and can make a difference. They want to do things that give their lives purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. They want to know their contributions truly matter.
- Mature adults seek spiritual growth in a time of significant life transitions and in a time when they are searching for meaning and purpose in life as they enter the second half of life and evaluating the things that really provide lasting fulfillment. They desire meaningful relationships where people can connect with one another and talk about spiritual and life issues.
- Mature adults seek intergenerational relationships to share their lives, stories, and faith across generations, and to be united with the whole faith community.

Key Characteristics of Older Adults

- Older adults are remaining vital and actively engaged in the lives of their community, church, social network, and family well into their 80s and 90s. Many are still involved in leadership roles at church and in the community.
- Older adults are experiencing changes in their body and a decline in mental and physical ability, such as a loss of hearing or vision or dexterity. Some older adults experience varying degrees of dementia. For many older adults these mental and physical changes reduce their mobility resulting in isolation from others.
- Older adults are continuing to learn and process new information, and many live well into their 90s with memory and logic intact.
- Older adults are addressing the challenge of integrity—reflecting on the life they have lived and coming away with either a sense of fulfillment from a life well lived or a sense of regret and despair. They are cultivating wisdom in which one's perspective on the world and human relationships reflect an inner sense of liberation from the rules, roles, and rituals of the past.
- Older adults are taking on new roles as senior citizens and adjusting to the role of mentor and sage in their extended family.
- Older adults are experiencing losses of friends and loved ones: death of a spouse, family members, and close friends.
- Older adults are facing the growing and continuous challenge of maintaining their independence, an issue of high priority for them, and the desire to stay in their own homes—"aging in place." Many will reluctantly come to accept being cared for by their family and moving from their own home into other living arrangements (with their children or in senior living or assisted living situations).
- Older adults have become the oldest generation in an extended family system comprising adult children, married children and their spouses, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.
- Older adults are becoming reconciled to their impending death and accepting their personal mortality. They are dealing with questions coming from the nearness of death: What is life about? How do we want to die?
- Older adults have grown into a deeper more personal faith that is clearly their own and desire ways to continually enrich their faith life.
- Older adults are actively engaged in the life of faith communities. They prefer a more traditional worship experience with familiar hymns and words. They value the Bible and the Christian tradition and desire to continue their learning as Christians.
- Older adults have a hunger for God and a desire to continue growing spiritually.