Becoming adult, being sexual
Sexuality on the long road to adulthood

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Forming and maintaining healthy intimate relationships and faithful sexuality can be an all-consuming struggle for young people today.[1] Sexual discovery and sexual expression have always been a part of becoming adult, but over the past century the road to adulthood has become far more complex. Sexual maturity and adulthood, once closely linked in terms of identity, discovery, and achievement, are now on separate tracks: youth recklessly rush sexual maturity while postponing traditional markers of adulthood. Biological and cultural pressures have translated into higher rates of premarital sexual activity. Meanwhile the road to adulthood is arguably longer, wider, more winding, and more perilous than it has ever been. Meet Sarah, one young woman navigating the road to adulthood.

> *I am a twenty-seven-year-old female from a small town who grew up in a supportive family that encouraged active participation in the Mennonite church. Toward the end of my time in high school, I felt adolescent pressures to get involved with sex, drugs, alcohol. I knew all were choices that my family and church would find disappointing, but I pushed those voices aside. Sex especially was part of growing up, part of being normal.*
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> *In college (a Mennonite one) my patterns continued. I found friends who were a lot like me, who used marijuana and drank. It usually wasn't hard to find someone to hook up with, either. I just wanted to get all there was out of life, and life was best at parties where I felt most alive.*
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> *After college this lifestyle continued. Sexual encounters were frequent, even though I seldom had a boyfriend. It all seemed so normal, who I was. However, I started to notice that my friends were starting to get established, tie*

the knot, negotiate salaries, and buy houses. I wasn't ready to have a full-time career. I felt like I would have had to give up being young. The last thing I wanted was to be tied down. Yet at the same time there was something in me that wanted the house, the kid, the picket fence, and stability most of all.

And the odd thing is that even though my parents taught me all the Bible stories, made me attend all my youth group meetings, paid for me to travel to Mennonite conventions, and sent me to a Mennonite college, I have a deep void when it comes to my spiritual life. I feel like Jesus never fit into who I am, nor do I feel like I fit into who Jesus is. I keep wondering what's wrong with me.[2]

For the sake of Sarah's physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being, and that of many other young adults, the church must talk about sexuality and intimacy. Young people in the church are longing for authentic conversations about sexuality and becoming adults. To walk alongside those approaching adulthood, however, Christian adults need a greater understanding of how the road to adulthood is changing, how intimacy has been reduced to sexuality, and how sexuality has been reduced to genital sex.

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The ideas presented here are necessarily oversimplified, given the brevity of this article and the complexity of the issues—of identity, culture, religion, politics, economics, and more—impinging on our sexuality. Some other aspects of sexuality and becoming adult are part of the larger picture the church needs to address, but I cannot address them here. These include the connection between sexual activity and the use of drugs and alcohol, the connection between sexual activity and self-abusive behavior, the connection between sexuality and spirituality, and the hypersexualization of young people in the media, among others. The contribution of this essay is to bring attention to just one set of issues that typically have been overlooked.

The long, winding, and perilous road to adulthood

"Adolescence begins in biology . . . and ends in culture."[3] This pithy statement holds much truth but masks the complexities and difficulties of the journey to adulthood. When we dive into the particulars of physiology and culture, and compare the process of becoming adult today with what that process looked like during various decades in the previous century, we observe that the time span has greatly expanded, starting a few years earlier and ending many years later.

From the biological perspective, today both males and females are reaching puberty at an earlier age. In Canada, the USA, and most Western countries, the average age at menarche in females was about 16.5 in the mid-1800s, 14.5 in the 1920s, and has been at 12.5 from the 1980s to the present.[4] Males are also reaching puberty earlier but still lagging about two years behind females. These changes mean that young people are physiologically equipped for reproduction at least two years earlier than their great-grandparents were. Biological changes thus widen the gap between when they are physically ready to be sexually active and when society has traditionally seen it as acceptable to engage in sexual activity, that is, in marriage.

With regard to this gap, however, the significance of social and economic changes eclipses the importance of earlier onset of puberty. Many interrelated socioeconomic factors visible in postindustrial capitalist societies work together in a maze of causes and effects to significantly delay attainment of adulthood and to alter socially acceptable expressions of sexuality. Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, author of *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, has observed that the average American in his or her early twenties no longer commonly reaches the markers sociologists once held as indicators of adulthood: finishing school, beginning full-time employment, getting married, and becoming parents.[5]

The pressure is great for young people to get a good education and a job that pays well. Education and employment, however, were not always so closely linked. In the early 1900s, less than 5 percent of young people attended college in America; by 2000 more than 60 percent attended college or undergraduate university programs, and one third of college and undergraduates went

on to graduate programs.[6] This ideal, however, is increasingly difficult to attain. The dizzying array of possible areas of study does not always reflect present and future employment possibilities. Education costs continue to rise, and more students work their way through school, frequently lengthening the time it takes them to complete a degree and increasing their stress levels. Nevertheless, college students feel the pressure to complete their education as quickly as possible. Christina describes this pressure:

> *Christina's parents taught that Christians should learn about the world, be involved in service, and work with those on the margins. However, when Christina decided to take a year off between her sophomore and junior years to work in the social work field, her parents' attitude changed. They were unhappy with her decision, fearing she would never return. Christina did return to school, her passion for social work ignited. She then took an opportunity to go to Mexico to learn about how some of the poorest people in the world live and how the wealthy are implicated in their poverty. Again her parents resisted. Again it was a life-changing experience. In both cases, her parents saw in hindsight the value of the time off. What is striking is the discrepancy between what Christina's parents taught her throughout the years and what they actually wanted for her. They said they wanted her to become a well-rounded person, but their fears suggest they sometimes just wanted her to settle down as a gainfully employed, productive citizen.*[7]

Christina's story does not address marriage, although we can assume that her parents also hope for a son-in-law and grandchildren. Common wisdom dictates that significant commitments such as marriage and parenthood should be put off in the name of education and employment. Statistics bear out this surmise: the median age of marriage in the U.S. has increased for males from twenty-three in 1950 to twenty-seven in 2000, and from twenty to twenty-five for females in the same period.[8]

But increased education and delayed employment are not the only reasons traditional markers for adulthood are harder to

attain. Changing attitudes and practices regarding sexuality have meant that sex and marriage are largely delinked. Widespread use of birth control and altered views on sexuality since the 1960s have meant that sexual relationships need not be restricted to marriage.[9] The media are saturated with sexually provocative images of young women and men. Colleges and universities are becoming places where young adults explore not only career paths but also sexual identity. This experimentation is captured in the refrain of a song by twenty-three-year-old Katy Perry, a Christian turned secular pop sensation: "I kissed a girl and I liked it / The taste of her cherry chap stick / I kissed a girl just to try it / I hope my boyfriend don't mind it."

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While sexual freedom has increased, the vast majority of young people still subscribe to semitraditional values about monogamous sexual relationships and the ideal of emotional commitment, or love. Young people in their twenties typically view marriage as the ultimate goal of their experimentation in relationships, but many take advantage of the latitude they have been offered for experimentation. However, new freedoms in sexual expression also bring new perils, such as emotional scarring from having sex before young people are "ready," uncertainty and confusion related to the lack of boundaries, and the threat of catching and spreading sexually transmitted diseases.

These socioeconomic changes combine to create an overarching shift: what were once markers of adulthood, eagerly pursued, are now viewed increasingly as burdens and obligations to be postponed.

Emerging adulthood and elusive adulthood

Jeffrey Arnett contends that even more significant than the fact that young adults are taking longer and longer to reach the traditional markers of adulthood is the fact that these markers are not even considered markers by those in their twenties. Graduation, employment, marriage, and parenting have been replaced by a new set of markers: taking responsibility for oneself, acting

independently, and being financially independent.[10] This new set is less concrete, less corporately definable, and not attached to specific events. The new markers have an air of exploration and discovery, of tentativeness, and of focus on the journey toward adulthood rather than the destination. Arnett concludes that a new developmental stage accounts for the extra distance on this journey; he calls this new stage "emerging adulthood."[11]

According to Arnett, emerging adulthood fits between late adolescence and young adulthood. It is distinct from late adolescence in that adolescents typically live at home, are undergoing and completing puberty, attend secondary school, and have the legal status of minors. In contrast, emerging adults generally do not live with their parents, are physically mature, may attend university or college, and have the legal status of adults. Physically and socially, emerging adults are distinct from adolescents. But neither are they young adults. Many have not finished education, and most are not on a stable occupational track. Most are not yet married and far fewer have children. Arnett suggests the label *young adult* should be reserved for those in their thirties. A further important characteristic of emerging adults is diversity: within the categories of adolescence and young adulthood there is great commonality, but emerging adults are diverse in terms of educational achievement, living arrangements, and employment, among other factors.[12] Instability and exploration are key characteristics of emerging adulthood.

Adulthood itself is changing dramatically. Many adults want the physical and legal perks of being adults, without the commitments, responsibility, accountability, and routines of settled life.

One problem with Arnett's understanding of emerging adulthood is that it assumes a clear, stable, commonly agreed-on understanding of what emerging adults emerge into. But adulthood itself is changing dramatically, sociologist James Côté suggests. Adult life in late modern capitalistic societies is highly individualistic, hedonistic, and narcissistic. As religious and social traditions wane, adulthood lacks structure and becomes self-defined. Adulthood itself can be characterized as "vague and prolonged" or "hazardous and elusive."[13] In fact, many adults appear to see as ideal the lifestyle of emerging adults. They want the physical and legal perks of being adults, without the

commitments, responsibility, accountability, and routines of settled life. Why would emerging adults want to rush toward adulthood when they are already living the prized life?

Another way of putting it, according to Côté, is that modern adulthood is more a psychological than a social state. The problem with adulthood is not the "diversity of lifestyles" and "preference based living" per se; the main problem is with "new forms of adulthood that lack connection with a community through shared norms and common goals."[14] It is hardly surprising that becoming adult is complicated, when the target—adulthood—is vague and moving, and when one does not see a community to move into.

How can the church respond?

How has the Mennonite church responded to the tensions emerging adults in the church may feel? How have we addressed their circumstance as sexual beings in a church context that traditionally prohibits sexual activity outside marriage?

Three responses, all inadequate, have predominated. One response is silence. The church is woefully slow to speak to these issues so crucial to the formation of emerging adults. A second response is a tacit acceptance of social and cultural norms permitting sexual activity outside marriage and committed relationships. Third, some suggest the church has responded in *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, article 19, "Family, Singleness, Marriage."[15] But this article does not speak to sexuality per se, only to "right sexual union" (intercourse) or "sexual intimacy." It does not address the processes of moral and spiritual formation or physical, emotional, and intellectual maturation.

All three responses point to the fact that the Mennonite church has one foot in a 1950s morality (reflected in our formal statements), which assumes that all sexual expression occurs in the context of heterosexual marriage, and another foot in 2000s socioeconomic realities, by virtue of our lifestyles and economic expectations for our young people. The latter exert pressure on young people to be successful by materialist and capitalist standards. Emerging adults must therefore adopt the standards either of faith or of culture, or feel the pull in both directions.

How can congregations and the church as a whole help emerging adults navigate the journey to adulthood?

First, adults in the church need to take a stance that is informed and compassionate, appropriate for our late modern Western context, yet not necessarily permissive. Emerging adults and adolescents did not create the world in which they are becoming adults. They are simply trying to find fulfillment in life with the tools they are given, as inadequate and unsuited for healthy maturation as these tools might be.

Second, the church needs to remember the incredible diversity within emerging adulthood. We dare not assume that all emerging adults are dealing with the same issues. A twenty-three-year-old male with a wife and child will face issues around intimacy and sexuality significantly different from those of a twenty-three-year-old single male in the midst of vocational discernment and applying to graduate schools.

The church has one foot in a 1950s sexual morality and another foot in 2000s socio-economic realities, by virtue of our lifestyles and economic expectations for our young people.

Third, sexuality and intimacy need to be addressed much more openly and much more often in the church. The church needs to offer a cohesive set of words and concepts with which to frame sexuality in a way fundamentally different from popular culture's. We need to reach deeper into tradition and the Bible, affirming sexuality as a gift best expressed, given, and received in the context of limits and boundaries.

A full understanding of sexuality and intimacy is possible only through theological accounts of God's creativity and intimacy as expressed in the Trinity; in creation; and in the story of Jesus's life, death, resurrection. As developmentally appropriate, parents need to address sexuality in the home with our children, and then also in church settings beginning with junior youth. Children, adolescents, and emerging adults need to hear adults of various ages and stages talking honestly about sexuality in safe settings, in the context of joys and challenges of Christian faith. The church needs to reclaim its role in shaping the morality and values of Christians.

Fourth, the church needs to confront the narrow and harmful notion that intimacy is reducible to genital sex. Both intimacy and sexuality are complex and multifaceted subjects. Equating the

two overlooks the rich and powerful nonphysical dimensions of sexuality and the nonsexual dimensions of intimacy. Intimacy and sexuality have deep emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions that will be present in robust and life-giving relationships. In particular, the connections between intimacy, sexuality, and spirituality need to be explored. How is "knowing" another person similar to and different from knowing God? It is important to name the vast array of ways sexuality and intimacy are expressed, both inside romantic relationships and outside them.

Fifth, another societal notion we need to confront is the notion that financial security is a prerequisite for marriage. As economic conditions in Canada and the U.S. decline, the ideal of financial security before marriage will become increasingly untenable for the vast majority of young people. It is already untenable for those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. The kind of financial security once normally attainable by age twenty-five will not be possible until age forty or fifty, if at all. More importantly, however, the notion of financial security itself needs to be challenged for a whole host of reasons, including but not limited to issues pertaining to emerging adults and sexuality. Among these reasons are ethical concerns about global equity, environmental concerns about energy resources and waste, and theological concerns about trusting in ourselves instead of in God.

Sixth, the church needs to provide Christian community. Emerging adults need places where healthy intimacy can be fostered and where sexual beauty and virility are not paramount. A community for emerging adults should include time with peers and time to interact with adults of all ages to converse about relationships, sexuality, vocation, and faith, etc. The church community should be a place where the use of technology, especially communications technology, serves to bring people together rather than isolate them. The church community should be a place where young men and women are encouraged to test their gifts and explore their passions. It should be a community that values regular face-to-face engagement in focal practices such as eating together, worshiping together, and spending time in nature. These practices will allow the church's members to address issues of sexuality and intimacy in the context of relationships between Creator, creatures, and creation.

Notes

[1] By *young people* I mean all stages between childhood and adulthood. *Adolescent* describes those generally in their teen years; *emerging adulthood,* those generally in their twenties; and *young adult*, those generally in their thirties. Especially with later stages, however, age is not the best indicator of a stage.
[2] Story collected by author. Names have been changed to protect privacy.
[3] Chap Clark, quoted in Duffy Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry: An Introduction to the Adventure* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2004), 165.
[4] Ingrid Swenson and Beverly Havens, "Menarche and Menstruation: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 4:4 (1987): 199–210.
[5] Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), v.
[6] Ibid., 5, 121.
[7] Story collected by author.
[8] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood,* 5.
[9] Ibid., 94.
[10] Ibid., vi.
[11] Ibid., 7–25.
[12] Ibid., 18–20.
[13] James Côté, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), 2, 5.
[14] Ibid., 43.
[15] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 72.

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