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ALEXANDER C. SCHULZE

## POSTMODERN TEENS AND TWENTYSOMETHINGS IN GERMAN-SPEAKING EUROPE

**Abstract:** This article briefly summarizes the results of a pioneering study in faith development research. Based on the data gathered by Valuegenesis Europe, the study examined the relationship between family and church variables and the faith development of adolescents and young adults in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Faith development was seen through the lenses of four new faith development dimensions: believing, belonging, caring, and doing. The article discusses the implications of this study to orient leaders to the faith development needs of the young generation in German-speaking Europe.

**Keywords:** *Valuegenesis Europe, youth, Seventh-day Adventist Church, believing, belonging, caring, doing, faith maturity, transmission of values*

### Jan: The Archetypal Youth in Germany

Jan is 18 years old. He likes Stefan Raab, the FC Köln, and reading *Harry Potter*. He says: “I look forward to the future.” In a few months he is doing his Abitur. If all goes well, he has more than 60 years of life before him. Jan is one of the first-year groups, which does not have to serve in the Bundeswehr. His country will need him anyway. Jan Müller is the next generation.

Jan Müller does not exist. Or more accurately, he exists not once but many thousands of times. Jan is the typical 18-year-old in Germany, an exemplar. The advertising agency Jung von Matt has created him from thousands of facts and figures, determined by professional surveys and home visits.

### Rebekka: The Archetypal Youth in German-Speaking Churches

Knowing with whom you are dealing? Target group analysis! Not a bad idea! Her name is Rebekka. She likes Rihanna and Silbermond. She is currently preparing for their final exams. If all goes well, she has at least another 60

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years of life ahead. The life expectancy of female non-smokers is generally higher. No, Rebekka does not smoke. Rebekka is the typical youth in Seventh-day Adventist communities in German-speaking Europe: female, well educated, life-affirming. The Church will need her. Rebekka is the next generation.

Rebekka will leave their church, together with thousands of other adolescents and young adults within the next few years. While the reasons for the ongoing dropout are manifold, the question remains: What are the key factors of faith-development that makes them stay?

## **Key Factors of Faith Development**

Jan and Rebekka are composite profiles of real people in German-speaking Europe. They are probably not that different from young people in urban contexts in other cultures, but they highlight a question that is seriously challenging church leaders today: How do young people develop faith? Intuition and experience tell us that family and church are probably the main factors. But how are they related? In English-speaking countries, this question has been researched for decades in the Valuegenesis research project. But in Europe, we were left wondering if these U.S. findings applied here, too. Now, at last, we know more: a Valuegenesis Europe study, covering 28 European countries, has surveyed more than 6,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 25.

Since I work as a youth director in the German-speaking part of Europe, I decided to pursue this question of the relationship between family and church factors in faith development for my doctoral research. I used the Valuegenesis data from German, Austrian, and Swiss respondents as the basis of my analysis. The results of this study provide evidence that can help leaders, educators, and administrators responsible for decision making in view of creating a church environment that is favorable to the development of mature young believers who value their relationship with the church.

The study built on the highly respected work of Fowler (1981), who identified stages of faith and built on the work of researchers like Piaget (1952), Vygotsky (1962), Erikson (1964), Bandura (1977), and Kohlberg (1981). The concept of faith development itself goes beyond the Fowlerian approach; it has influenced the Valuegenesis research project that has led to a long list of publications in the United States and in Australia (e.g., Dudley, 2000, 2007; Dudley & Gillespie, 1992; Gillespie, Donahue, Gane, & Boyatt, 2004; Kijai, 1993; Thayer, 1993). This Valuegenesis study was recently replicated in Europe with modifications (see Bochmann, 2013; Brunotte, 2008; Casti, 2008; Schulze, 2012a, 2013, 2015; Sigg, 2013; and Spiegler, 2013).

## Statistics and Demographics

The original Valuegenesis Europe questionnaire contained 335 items, which were analyzed for applicability to the research questions. Finally, 145 items were selected and grouped into 13 family variables, 14 church variables, and 7 control variables. In order to analyze how these factors interacted with faith development, I constructed four faith development scales corresponding to four ways faith expresses itself among adolescents and young adults in German-speaking Europe (see sidebar).

The sample used in this study consisted of 1,359 adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 25. Over half of them (55.3%) were female. They were well educated, had married parents (84.6%), and came from economically well-established homes. 8.6% were Austrian, 73.7% were German, and 12.1% were Swiss. Most of them had been baptized (61.2%), and 4 in 5 indicated that they came from third-generation Adventist homes.

## What We Found

The major results of this study are consistent with the findings of previous researchers. What was new in this study, however, was the use of four variable categories—Believing, Belonging, Caring, and Doing—to distinguish between different aspects of faith development (see sidebar). While previous research dealt with faith development in general, this study has shown that there are large differences between these four aspects of faith development. Church and family variables had the strongest relationships with the Belonging aspect of faith development, followed by Doing and Believing. Caring always showed the weakest relationship. The study also identified the importance of church relationships and responsibilities and the use of personal talents as being highly related to the faith development of adolescents and young adults.

The study confirmed what anecdotal evidence already suggests: both Family and Church contribute to the faith development of adolescents and young adults in German-speaking Europe in multiple ways. Three of the 13 family variables and nine of the church variables correlated highly with faith development. These findings have practical implications for families, leaders of congregations, and administrators as they strive to minister to the younger generation in German-speaking Europe. In addition, they may serve as challenges to leaders in any culture in their relationship with youth and young adults.

ASPECTS OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT			
<b>Believing</b> Measures personal faith in terms of feeling and believing	<b>Belonging</b> Measures the importance of being part of a congregation	<b>Caring</b> Measures the social responsibility to care for fellow humans and the environment	<b>Doing</b> Measures strengthening one's own faith and sharing it with others, and applying it to political or social issues

## What Families Can Do

The family is still the place where the foundations of faith are laid. Eighty-one percent of all participants had parents or grandparents who are third-generation Seventh-day Adventists. For them, their family is the first connection to the church, so it did not come as a surprise that the factors Spiritual Life, Family Climate, and Religious Mother were the strongest key factors for faith development among the Family variables. Following are a few selected implications of these findings for practice.

### *Model the Spiritual Life*

A family is the first place where faith is lived out in everyday life. It is also the place where spiritual habits, even faith rituals, are formed in concrete ways. The spiritual life of the family expresses itself in regular times of worship and prayer in addition to attendance of the church service (#287: Frequency of family spiritual activities). Singing, making music, and studying the Bible (#286: Family spiritual activities) nurture the spiritual life of a family. When the spiritual life is real, there are opportunities to make meaningful connections in the emerging faith narrative of a young person. This can occur through discussing faith questions intellectually as well as behaviorally, acting on those beliefs, and thus experiencing God's presence in everyday life in meaningful ways. The spiritual influence of parents and siblings strongly colors the faith development of children. When these early learning experiences are meaningful, they have the potential to provide an anchor in difficult situations, to carry young adults through bad times and lead back to faith.

### *Build a Happy Family Climate*

Even if most of the survey items of the Family Climate scale had almost no direct relationship with religiosity, a good family atmosphere, the role of a religiously active mother, and a meaningfully practiced and experienced spiritual life have a powerful influence on faith development. Young people's faith develops when they can describe their home as happy, their family as loving, and their relationships with their parents as good. It develops when they feel that they receive help, obtain support, and experience expressions of love from their parents. Finally, their faith develops when they see their mother as a source of meaningful spirituality.

### *Understand the Influence of the Faith-Practicing Mother*

A special influence on the faith development of adolescents and young adults is the religiosity of the mother. This factor takes into account not only how mothers live their religious convictions, but also how often they talk with

their children and others about their faith. Thus the mother-child relationship was an important source of the young people's ability to trust God and to develop their faith as adolescents and young adults.

## **What Churches Can Do**

While the influence of the family on the faith development of adolescents and young adults seems to decline as young people grow older, the influence of the church continues to increase. Of particular importance are the regular and multigenerational activities of the local church, as well as age-specific activities on the local and regional level (youth ministry). Faith grows in a community that fosters healthy interpersonal and multigenerational relationships and trusts its young people to contribute to the life of the church through their gifts and talents. As the generations worship together, they need to keep the spiritual needs of their young people in mind. Youth will thrive in an affirming church atmosphere and the cognitive experience of church events.

### *Maintain Regular and Multigenerational Church Activities*

This study found that regular and multigenerational activities of the local church, where church is experienced as a multigenerational community, have an immensely positive influence on faith development. Such activities include not only the weekly worship service of the local church and the organized weekly Bible studies (Sabbath school), but also the hands-on, practical engagement in social action and humanitarian projects. Interestingly, church activities often provide an unconscious continuity and stability in the otherwise dynamic and constantly changing circumstances in the life of adolescents and young adults. The task of leaders is to help the church to become conscious of how they are living and interacting as a multigenerational community.

### *Invest in Youth Ministry*

Of course, some needs are best addressed in age-specific activities for adolescents. Churches in Germany have Adventurer and Pathfinder clubs for their children and young adults. In addition, the church organizes activities for young adults in both local and regional venues (i.e., weekend retreats) which have an immense influence on the faith development of young people. Local churches that support their adolescents and young adults by making it possible for them to participate in regional events are investing in their own future.

### *Realize the Importance of Church Relationships*

Another key factor related to the faith development of adolescents and young adults is the appreciation of healthy interpersonal and multigenera-

tional relationships within the church. Both are necessary—meaningful fellowship with young people of the same age, and good relationships with older church members. Whereas the special value of the relationships between peers is found in the similar life circumstances, the age difference of multigenerational relationships can give them access to broader life experience. Age difference in itself may not always be seen as an advantage, at least at first. But older church members may have an immense positive influence on the faith development of adolescents and young adults, if they refrain from putting up their own experience as the standard and instead stay open to the challenges of the permanently changing environment of the youth.

### *Empower by Sharing Responsibilities and Affirming Personal Gifts*

When local churches empower their youth to share responsibilities that allow them to try things out and use their gifts and talents, when they involve them in ministry—even in leadership roles—they strongly contribute to their faith development. In this way, churches not only take care of necessary tasks but also provide opportunities for the next generation to develop their potential and their identity for the benefit of all.

### *Allow an Intergenerational Worship Experience*

Churches consider the worship hour as a sacred time. This study confirms the pivotal role of the intergenerational worship experience in the faith development of adolescents and young adults. But churches need to ask themselves to what extent the presence of God can be sensed. Has our service become so routine that it fosters boredom, even frustration? Or is there still a refreshing spontaneity in our worship, and a feeling of awe or mystery that leads to a growing understanding of God? More than other key factors, the worship experience is a hybrid factor. While we need to strive for creating the best possible conditions for a meaningful worship experience, we need to realize that God's presence ultimately depends on His Spirit being there.

### *Be Aware of Spiritual Needs*

Adolescents and young adults often face age-related circumstances that create particular spiritual needs that can become very important in their faith development. For instance, when they leave their hometown after high school to go to college, they often also lose connection with their local church. Will they find a spiritual home in their new location where they are welcomed with open arms and their spiritual needs are met?

Children of divorced parents often have to commute regularly between the

residences of their father and mother. Already marginalized through divorce, they are especially sensitive to how they are welcomed into a new community. But are local churches ready and able to receive them and minister to them in their special need? Leaders have a special responsibility to help the local church be conscious of how they meet the spiritual needs of all generations and how they live out the New Testament exhortation to bear one another's burdens as a spiritual community that models faith in tangible ways.

### *Provide a Meaningful Youth Program*

Young people look for quality and relevance in organized youth programs. Providing meaningful youth programs does not mean only faithfully scheduling a variety of youth events; it also includes making sure there is relevant content that addresses the needs of young people. The quality of youth ministry is measured by its venue as well as by the real-life applicability of what is shared with the youth. The challenge is not only to entertain, but to develop and nurture relevant spiritual relationships.

### *Create an Open, Thinking Climate*

Adolescents and young adults are searching for answers. They want to be taken seriously and challenged in their thinking. They need to be allowed to wrestle with their own questions. They are not satisfied merely with traditional answers. They expect openness from their parents' and grandparents' generation. Although the local churches may feel challenged by these expectations, this search for meaningful answers is a logical, consistent, and necessary part of developing an identity.

Adolescents and young adults in German-speaking Europe are now better educated than any generation before. This does not mean that they know all the right answers, but they have learned to ask questions and have been trained to question answers critically. They have also learned that knowledge is often discovered in discussion and meaningful dialogue. Interestingly, both the permission to think for themselves and the questioning of traditional answers were typical for the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Many of them were young adults who contributed significantly to the birth of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. How can we develop a constructive discourse that allows the Word of God to be heard with 21<sup>st</sup>-century ears in a way that speaks afresh to the problems and questions of today's generation—both within and outside the church? Church leaders are right when they encourage an open, thinking climate that allows the discussion of even inconvenient questions.



### *Keep the Church Warm(th)*

Last but not least, it cannot be overemphasized how great the influence of the local church atmosphere is on the faith development of adolescents and young adults. When I speak of warmth, I mean heartfelt warmth in personal relationships that expresses itself in friendliness and the acceptance of others, even strangers. Whether they have been in the same local church all their lives or find themselves new in town, wondering if they will fit into the existing church, young people are looking for a warm spiritual home. Whether they feel accepted by the local church and experience the atmosphere within the church community as warm and loving is dependent not only on what the church does—young people also bring their own baggage of expectations and experiences that have shaped them. But even with this realization that many factors are ultimately at play, we affirm that the local church atmosphere is a crucial factor in the young people's journey towards a mature faith.

### **What More Can the Church Do?**

Although many key factors of faith development are related to families and local churches, some of the findings need to be recognized as a challenge to church organizations, with implications for the ministry of the church in the area of leadership, education, and administration.

### *Foster the Cooperation Between Families and Youth Ministry*

Youth ministry in German-speaking Europe focuses on children (until age 12), Pathfinders (10 to 16), youth (14 to 20), and university students (18 to 25). But none of these ministries involve the families of the youth. Parents are not involved in the planning of the programs or in the youth events themselves; they have almost no influence on the content presented. In most cases, all decisions about programs and activities are carried out by the pastors and youth leaders of the church. The parents' role is often limited to providing a free shuttle service. This may be one of the reasons for the finding that there are fewer key factors of faith development in the area of family than in the area of church and that the influence of the family on the faith development of adolescents and young adults declines as youth grow older. But while the necessity to continue and further develop the successful efforts in youth ministry seems to be an obvious conclusion, leaders must take a closer look at the connection between family and youth ministry. How can both work together more synergistically, so youth ministry could be an even more successful key factor of faith development?

### *Focus on Young-Adult Ministry*

Due to increasing education times today, young adults enter into work life

and start their own family at older ages than those of a generation ago (Schulze, 2012b). There is an urgent need to understand the new situation of today's "twentysomethings." The Seventh-day Adventist church in German-speaking Europe has no special ministry for young adults older than 25 years of age. This study found that the influence of the church on the faith development of adolescents and young adults slightly increases until the age of 23; after that it declines. Those people older than 23 not only feel too old for the current youth ministries, they definitely are too old. It is recommended that to meet the needs of young adults, we need to develop and provide age-related programs incorporated in young-adult ministry.

### *Develop Advanced Programs for Baptized Youth*

Christian efforts often focus on preparing people for baptism. This is obviously a necessary focus. But this study has found that family and church factors are even more influential in the faith development of non-baptized than baptized young people. So the question is, What happens after baptism, as people continue to develop their identity and their place in life (Jay, 2012)? The importance of this question leads me to recommend that leaders reexamine how the church can provide conditions where the faith of young people can continue to grow and further develop even after they are baptized.

### *Understand the Influence of Milieus on Youth Ministry*

The worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church maintains one of the largest private school systems in the world. In some countries, learning is so highly prized that membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church is actually attractive because of its potential for social advancement. In German-speaking Europe the situation is different. Public education is high quality and private education is not easily available. Thus the youth ministry of the local church often has taken on a very cognitive educational function. This may be a blessing but also a factor for exclusion which needs further study. For instance, this study found that such an approach has less influence on adolescents and young adults from blue-collar families as compared to youth from educated or white-collar families. Further, it was found that family and church factors play a greater role in the formation of Austrian and Swiss youth than German youth. Another finding indicates that family and church factors are more influential for adolescents and young adults from separated or divorced parents than for their counterparts whose parents are married. For this reason this study recommends that leaders pay more attention to the socioeconomic and sociocultural milieus young people come from and better tailor programming to differing needs.

## Support Gender-Related Youth Ministry

Related to the above findings is the fact that the conceptual approach of youth ministry in German-speaking Europe does not take into account the differing needs of males and females. The study found that youth ministry seems to have a stronger influence on the doing aspect of faith development for females than it does for males. This finding highlights the need for church organizations to develop gender-related materials and programs that pay attention to the different needs of female and male adolescents and young adults (Pithan, Arzt, Jacobs, & Knauth, 2009).

At the beginning of this article I introduced you to Jan and Rebekka. They represent the real people in and around the church. How can we reach them? How do we help nurture their faith? How can our church be a place where people find God and live out the Gospel in meaningful ways? By now you probably understand that there are no easy answers to these questions. The current study helps us to see more clearly how family and church influence the faith development of our youth, but it provides just a snapshot of current realities that seem to be changing over time. To gain an in-depth time perspective, similar studies need to be done at regular intervals.

There are other questions to ask: What can we learn from the perspectives of adult church members and adult workers in youth ministry? Are there other key factors of faith development that have not yet been identified? And how do the findings from German-speaking countries compare with the results from other European countries? While we don't have all the answers, one thing is clear: churches still have the potential to be home for the younger generation. But will leaders be willing to guide congregations to become intentional and welcoming communities not only for those who have it all together, but also for those still struggling to develop faith?

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