



Great EXPECTATIONS

A Newsletter on Expanding Ministry *With Older People*

Wanted: Compassionate Older Adult Moral Models

David Brooks surfaced the issue again in an opinion piece for *The New York Times* (9/14/11). He referenced research by a team headed by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith, published in the new book *Lost in Transition*. They asked questions of 18- to 23-year-old men and women, queries about “right and wrong, moral dilemmas and the meaning of life.” When challenged to describe a moral dilemma they had faced, “two thirds of the young people either couldn’t answer the question or described problems that are not moral at all, like whether they could afford to rent a certain apartment or whether they had enough quarters to feed the meter at a parking spot,” Brooks noted.

However, what concerns us most in our Christian families and congregations is Brooks’ concern that the moral feelings of young people are not linked to “any broader thinking about a shared moral framework or obligation.” For example, one young person said, “I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But, different people feel different ways, so I couldn’t speak on behalf of anyone else as to what’s right and wrong.”

Brooks presents a balanced critique. He writes, “This doesn’t mean that America’s young people are immoral. Far from it. But, Smith and company emphasize they have not been given the resources—by schools, institutions and families—to cultivate their moral intuitions, to think more broadly about moral obligations, to check behaviors that may be degrading.”

He’s pleading with us. We followers of Christ Jesus are the parents and grandparents, the family members, the partners in the institution of the Christian Church and its schools who can make a difference in how young people today form and act upon their moral convictions. Through the apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are reminded that “through the law [God’s revealed commandments] we become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:20 NIV84). In fact, Paul clarified, “I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet’ ” (Rom. 7:7 NIV84). His Law is God’s moral compass to guide his children in every human generation through every situation.

Even more significantly, God’s good news is that He provides the personal rebirth and ongoing power to live and walk according to his moral standards. He transforms us into new people who trust the forgiveness Christ worked out for us through His cross and resurrection. Now we, young and old together, can confess with the psalmist, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your Word. . . . Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps. 119: 9, 105).

What to do in our congregations?

- Conduct intergenerational adult Bible studies, such as “CrossTalk, conversations across the generations which explore the Holy Scriptures to apply new discoveries about how to live out our worship, witness, nurture, service and fellowship relationships with one another.”
- Make it a program and activity emphasis in our Senior Fellowship Groups that we boldly equip older folks to more and more become the moral models from which younger folks receive encouragement and inspiration.
- Arrange with leaders in children’s ministries to train and offer proxy grandparents to families whose grandparents have died or who do not live close enough to enjoy a face-to-face relationship with their grandchildren.
- In congregation newsletters or monthly correspondence, bolster older people to step up their reading and research into their roles as examples of behaviors that are designed and completed by God’s Holy Spirit at work in them.

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■ Vol. 3 No. 12
■ October 2011

A publication of
LCMS Office of National
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