

**Context:**

Published in a church newsletter, this article is the result of Rev. Gordon Hines' attempt to retain youth at St. George's Anglican Church, Las Vegas.

# On Christian adulthood

December 18, 2018

At 9 am on November 10, Peter Gross, Executive Director of Wheatstone Ministries, conducted a training session at St. George's Anglican Church in Las Vegas, Nevada. Titled "Christian Adulthood 101," the four-hour course was designed to help churches to retain youth by helping them to let go of it.

Rev. Gordon Hines invited Gross to speak to his parish about after meeting at a clergy retreat led by the Rev. Canon Stephen Dart. (Mr. Gross is also the son-in-law of parishioner Kathy Ruud).

**The Theory of Everything**

US church attendance has slackened in the 21st century, especially among young people. If current trends don't change, America will be as irreligious as Western Europe in a matter of decades.

To Mr. Gross, the issue is not the lack of youth ministry or a rising tide of secularism, but the lack of effective ministry that prepares youth to become adults.

Gross argues that the 21st century (and the close of the 20th) have been characterized by an advertisement-driven obsession with youth. It is this trend, not academic atheists or pop culture progressivism, that has emptied church pews.

"Adulthood," he said, "has been set up by a large community of people as a bad thing."

Yet, as he often reminds his audiences, it is adults, not children, who can turn infatuation into romance, sadness into grief, and doubt into mysticism.

Media are so powerful that even Christians now raise their children to "live their best lives now," before being tied down by work and family. Traditionally, though, such responsibilities dominated (and gave meaning to) the lives of past generations, raised to believe that "none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself" (Romans 14:7).

In short, Gross says that America's rejection of adulthood isn't just a cultural fad, but a theological position that runs contrary to the faith delivered to the saints. The implicit message: To mature and gain wisdom is a tragedy. Awkward, difficult adolescence is the best it's gonna get.

As Gross is quick to point out, it is also "the most depressing thing to say to a teenager!"

### **Vanity and vexation of spirit**

The graying and shrinking of America's churches has correlated to the rise of highly-protective "helicopter parenting." The sheltered youth produced by this parenting style are educated and savvy, but lack self-reliance and resent their own failure to launch.

Since the 2008 Recession, traditional adult milestones, like financial independence or marriage, have been pushed even further out of their reach.

"Childish adults are the most dangerous thing in the world... Adults treated like children are the saddest."

Gross argues that the faith of young people suffers from the same trends. Their parents, who idealize youth, raise them with platitudes instead of guidance, and shelter them from bad influences instead of teaching them to "think theologically."

*In an age of humiliating, delayed adulthood, youth are conditioned to view religion as immature.* When they are faced with progressive professors, or loved ones coming out of the closet, young people are left with no way (and no reason) to defend their parents' beliefs.

When they grow up, they put childish things behind them.

### **Apostle of adulthood**

A former Anthropology and Philosophy student at Biola, and a graduate of its Torrey Honors Institute, a great books-based liberal arts program, Gross was fascinated by foreign rites of passage as an undergraduate – and struck by their absence from American culture, with its consumerism and worship of youth.

Gross was still mulling the connection between these concepts when he joined Wheatstone Ministries as an unpaid volunteer.

Now, as a 31-year-old father of one and parishioner at St. Matthews, Newport Beach, Gross has devoted his life to Wheatstone. He developed "Christian

Adulthood 101” as a formal response to America’s rejection of maturity, and considers his work on youth ministry to be a modern reformation. On Christian adulthood he stands; he can do no other.

“I love maturity. I love adulthood. And it seems so sad to miss out on that.”

### **Wheatstone**

Founded in 2000 and based in Fullerton, California, Wheatstone is an aggressively ecumenical ministry. Any church that affirms the Nicene Creed may request its services, as an increasing number have done across a wide variety of theological traditions.

Wheatstone offers four trainings in addition to Christian Adulthood 101: Discussion for Transformation, Teach Them to Pray, From Duty to Discipleship and Entering Culture Courageously. In addition, Wheatstone holds Academy Camps, week-long events designed as Christian rites of passage for their alumni.

In an era of deep pessimism about the future of Christianity, Gross believes that his trainings and camps are an effective way of making youth into disciples.

“We can be hopeful because God is on our side.”