

## **Character formation and emerging adulthood: Exploring Christian moral conversion**

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### **Abstract**

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are characterized by developing owned values, ideas, lifestyle habits, etc. Character expresses values and virtues we consider to be important, relates to goals we aim at and deals with both emotions (desires) and cognitions, it is about attitudes in concrete practices. Moral conversion refers to the process through which this character is formed. It includes one's faith, identity, and moral journey. Amid a diversity of social contexts, spiritual resources, and communities; people demonstrate how they respond to situations and whether character is indeed demonstrated. Character could also be formed in these varying contexts and situations. We develop further knowledge about emerging adults and character (formation) and would like to know how young people live out any specific values, grow and change in their moral attitude through participating in certain practices. We assume the intention of our acts, show moral considerations, and is for Christians somehow connected to the gospel, but this truth remains to be evidenced empirically. Through empirical research conducted with emerging adults studying theology in South Africa and Netherlands, this article investigates how these emerging adults consider character formation through their lenses of religious beliefs and in the midst of certain practices or situations, in particular crises.

### **Key words**

*character formation, faith formation, moral development, values*

## Introduction

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are characterized by developing owned values, ideas, lifestyle habits, etc. Character consists of a collection of attitudes or virtues aiming for the good.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is something we could develop and train. Amid a diversity of social contexts, spiritual resources, and communities; people demonstrate how they respond to situations and whether character is indeed demonstrated. Character could also be formed in these varying contexts and situations.

In this article, we aim at developing further knowledge about if and how emerging adults live out any specific values and virtues (character) and grow in their moral attitude from a Christian perspective. We do so, to gain a better understanding of moral actions and Christian faith in the daily lives of young adults and hope this knowledge inspires religious education when it comes to character development. As Christians, we assume the intention of our acts is somehow connected to the gospel, but this truth remains to be evidenced empirically. Through empirical research conducted with emerging adults studying theology in South Africa and Netherlands, this article investigates how these emerging adults consider character formation through their lenses of religious beliefs and practices. Through conducting a brief pilot study during the Covid-19 pandemic, we interviewed fifteen university students in South Africa (7) and the Netherlands (8). The Dutch cohort were all current theology students while the SA cohort included a couple of theology alumni within the specified age group of 19–30 years old. We should note that despite both institutions experiencing national lockdowns at the time we conducted this study, participants' reflections on crisis were not directly related to the pandemic. In many stories (personal) tensions and crisis matter in the character formation of these youth. This is evidenced in how they balanced this dynamic of crisis and the role their Christian faith plays in this dynamic. We highlight contextual considerations in both countries. The focus in this

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1 W. Sanderse & J. Kole (ed.). *Karakter – Deugden voor professionals* (Isvw Uitgevers, 2018). Research with these emerging young adults portrays that the terms values and virtues are understood similarly. For this reason, we use the two terms in synonymous relation to each other being fully aware that this is not necessarily the case in other instances.

article is however placed on the practices that we believe inform or affect young adult character formation and value development.

## Theoretical frame

### The interplay between character development, value/virtue, and moral conversion

In comparison with a more Kohlbergian cognitive approach of moral development,<sup>2</sup> in an approach from virtue education,<sup>3</sup> context plays a more crucial role alongside the interplay of emotions and cognitions. It is this contextual as well as holistic approach that seems to be important for Christian formation. Here we consider faith formation in young people inclusive of their identity and moral formation.

Furthermore, character could be formed and transformed. That makes it also an important issue for formation. There are many books written<sup>4</sup> on character education, mainly within the context of the USA and specifically related to positive psychology. From a pedagogical point of view, this is often with the normative stance that a young person has to be challenged to grow towards their own position and responsibility.<sup>5</sup> Within our research, we add a theological norm when we say: Christian faith motivates people developing to live the good of the gospel in word and deed.<sup>6</sup> The gospel thus

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- 2 John Snarey and Peter Samuelson, “Moral education in the cognitive development tradition: Lawrence Kohlberg’s revolutionary ideas,” in *Handbook of moral and character education* (London: Routledge, 2008), 69–95.
  - 3 Carwyn Jones, “Character, virtue and physical education.” *European Physical Education Review* 11, no. 2 (2005): 139–151.
  - 4 Darcia Narvaez and Daniel Lapsley, “Becoming a moral person – Moral development and moral character education as a result of social interactions,” in *Empirically informed ethics: Morality between facts and norms* (Cham: Springer, 2014), 227–238; Daniel K. Lapsley and David Yeager, “Moral-character education,” in *Handbook of Psychology, Volume 7: Educational Psychology* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
  - 5 Jonathan Haidt, “Elevation and the positive psychology of morality,” in C. L. M. Keyes & J. Haidt (eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 275–289.
  - 6 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the faith of our teenagers is telling the American church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Shantelle Weber, *Faith formation of young people in an evangelical context: an empirical and theoretical investigation* (PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2014).

forms one's character and lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> A PhD study conducted on the faith formation of young people between 14–17 years old revealed that youth faith, identity and morality cannot be separated. The same study revealed that one of the core factors influencing youth faith formation negatively was inauthentic Christian adults who taught one thing yet practiced another. This was sighted as one of the reasons young people leave institutional church after they turn 18 years old and leave their family home (and rules). Pfeijffer analyses the changes YouTube has brought about in society noting that people are now famous not for their moral integrity (as the saints were in earlier times) or because of their knowledge or skills, but for their perceived authenticity. He maintains they are role models because they create the impression of being themselves and of being close to the people, with an endless stream of daily footage about themselves. Authenticity is valued, as that is exactly what is missing in our world. Pfeijffer argues that a generation is growing up that does not care for morals, knowledge, or skills – the purpose of their lives is rather to imitate people who create the illusion of authenticity.

Moral conversion refers to a change. We understand this change as taking place through the practice of values and virtues and the gifts of hope, love, and faith (theological virtues) and the more virtues self takes dominion over the less virtuous self.<sup>8</sup> We realize that moral conversion is a debated process, so we do not aim at contributing to the theory on this concept in this article, but rather consider the change of attitude as young people grow or are transformed through such conversion.<sup>9</sup> It is through this lens that we reflect on and analyse our data. So, on the one hand, conversion asks a proactive attitude of people, on the other hand, conversion cannot be arranged by people only and as a gift of grace; this is a paradoxical approach which helps to keep promise and task, two biblical notions, together.

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7 David M. Gustafson, *Gospel witness: evangelism in word and deed* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2019).

8 Sarah A. Schnitker, Thomas J. Felke, Justin L. Barrett, and Robert A. Emmons, "Longitudinal study of religious and spiritual transformation in adolescents attending young life summer camp: Assessing the epistemic, intrapsychic, and moral sociability functions of conversion." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6, no. 2 (2014): 83.

9 Robert Morgan, "Method in Theology. By Bernard Lonergan Pp. xii+405. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972. £4.50," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 25, no. 1 (1974): 234–235.

Conn<sup>10</sup> adds that Christian conversion is not yet another conversion instead moral, cognitive, and psycho-social conversion focused on Jesus Christ in the symbolic context of the Christian story. Bernard Häring speaks of conversion, employing the metaphor of dialogue with the aim of highlighting the dynamic interplay of Christ, the divine word, and the human response.<sup>11</sup> In relation to virtue development, both psychological theory and Christian theology maintain that a spiritual transformation should lead to the subsequent development of virtues. Research shows that young people who demonstrated an increase in spirituality also increased in intellectual, theological, other-focused, and temperance virtues.<sup>12</sup> Webber<sup>13</sup> adds that behaviour does not change based on global traits such as prudence, temperance, courage, or fairness, but from local traits such as going through crisis on varying levels or celebrating hope in situations. This is explored further later, for now we aim at making the link between one's moral conversion, character and virtue formation ultimately lived out through one's values.

Morality is related to age as well, because how teenagers deal with it differs from (emerging) adults.<sup>14</sup> Research<sup>15</sup> shows that there is greater change in personality traits during adolescence than in adulthood. The capacity to self-regulate emotional impulses by character strengths is not fully developed

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- 10 Walter E. Conn, *Christian conversion: A developmental interpretation of autonomy and surrender* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 2.
  - 11 Bernard Häring. *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, Volume 1. *General Moral Theology*, (New York: Crossroad, 1978).
  - 12 Sarah A. Schnitker, Thomas J. Felke, Justin L. Barrett, and Robert A. Emmons, "Virtue Development Following Spiritual Transformation in Adolescents Attending Evangelistic Summer Camp." *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 33, no. 1 (2014): 22–35.
  - 13 Jonathan Webber, "Virtue, character and situation." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (2006):193–213.
  - 14 Anne A. J van Goethem, Anne van Hoof, Marcel A. G. van Aken, Quinten A.W. Raaijmakers, Jan Boom, and Bram Orobio de Castro, "The role of adolescents' morality and identity in volunteering. Age and gender differences in a process model." *Journal of adolescence* 35, no. 3 (2012):509–520.
  - 15 Christopher C. Henrich, Sidney J. Blatt, Gabriel P. Kuperminc, Ada Zohar, and Bonnie J. Leadbeater. "Levels of interpersonal concerns and social functioning in early adolescent boys and girls." *Journal of Personality Assessment* 76, no. 1 (2001):48–67.

in early adolescence, especially for boys. Ella and Benish-Weisman<sup>16</sup> note that values become better indicators of individual characteristics during adolescence. Adolescents increase their endorsement of self-focused values and decrease their valuation of other-focused values. They maintain the integrity of their value system despite value changes, confirming and validating value theory. This suggests then that the observed changes are precisely what was needed for healthy identity formation in ways that allow society to adapt to changes in circumstances and aspirations of successive generations. Each generation has its own characteristic pattern of tastes, preferences, and values that distinguish it, so that sociologists find it useful to distinguish different birth cohorts in order to understand their behaviour as society adapts to changing external conditions and internal aspirations. So, we see from the discussion here that values are developed as early as adolescence but do not remain static as these young people grow into emerging adults.

During this pandemic, the Fuller Youth Institute in their survey on young adults found that youth are not willing to return to institutionalized church if we are not going to transform ourselves after being impacted by all that this trauma has taught us about church. They note that we cannot return to church as it was prior to this pandemic because who we are, how we think, what influences us and so much more has changed. The church needs to rethink its approach to addressing who congregants have become. The two opposing views of either being authentic or fake are concerning when reflecting on young adult ministry in congregations both in the Netherlands and South Africa today.

### **Formation: interplay between moral development and faith**

Till now we have looked at moral conversion as it relates to one's character and moral development. Our shift now goes to moral development as it is related to faith. Moral and faith formation are connected and interdependent on each other and should not be neglected as such.

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16 Ella Daniel and Maya Benish-Weisman, "Value development during adolescence: Dimensions of change and stability." *Journal of personality* 87, no. 3 (2019):620–632.

Young<sup>17</sup> suggests the work of virtue formation commences when young people begin asking themselves questions about identity and what sort of person they want to be. She does not suggest a particular set of virtues that should be important but does argue that the purpose of the youth worker is to support young people's decision making that leads to a virtuous life. Ord<sup>18</sup> would agree, arguing that the modelling of virtues, and their impact on the character of the young people, is not easily quantifiable.

Youth faith formation should thus not be contemplated without taking their identity and moral formation into consideration. Youth are not rigid in their thinking and interaction with other faiths and belief systems.<sup>19</sup> This alerts the church to the importance of exposing these youth to different viewpoints within the safe environments (church) they have come to. The importance of moral formation within the context of relationship cannot be over stressed. In this regard, youth faith formation should also not be contemplated without taking their individual and communal contexts into account.<sup>20</sup> Young people are confronted with the plurality of values, beliefs, and cultures they encounter daily and should not be coerced into only one perspective to the situation. Their families and churches need to enable them to develop the discernment they need to make their own life choices. The importance of the faith community, their educational and societal community and their familial community lies in them being able to listen to the opinions of others and also share their opinions with others as they process their faith. Good motivations and intentions must be embodied in right practices.<sup>21</sup>

Positive experiences and formation based on positive psychology are formative, but we believe that crisis and negative experiences, which are

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17 Kerry Young, *The art of youth work* (Lyme Regis: Russell House, 1999); Young, "Youth workers as moral philosophers: developing right thinking and mindfulness," in Sarah Banks (ed.), *Ethical issues in youth work* (London: Routledge 2010), 106–119; Peter Hart, "The reality of relationships with young people in caring professions: A qualitative approach to professional boundaries rooted in virtue ethics." *Children and youth services review* 83 (2017): 248–254.

18 Jon Ord, *Youth work process, product and practice* (Lyme Regis: Russell House, 2007).

19 Weber, Faith formation of young people.

20 J. A. Van der Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 30.

21 S. A. Weber, "(South) African voice on youth ministry research: Powerful or powerless?" *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015):01–06 (12)

not the intentions of formal education, could have a relevant contribution in the character formation of young people. Such crisis and challenging life experiences cannot be separated from their faith formation process.

Within character education the importance of exemplars is often highlighted. Everyone has significant others in this process whether this is based on people you admire, people you want to distance yourself from or views, networks, relationships in which you were socialized as a child. In this theory on exemplars, is also emphasized that imitation does not mean becoming the same as the exemplar, but is a way of emulation, of appropriating the good for your own context and become even better than the exemplar. This is further discussed below through engaging Christian practice.

### **The interplay between character and Christian practice among young adults**

In all decisions, McDowell <sup>22</sup>explains, a virtuous person is not one who decides what to do through applying principles, but “one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way” influenced by having a disposition to display certain characteristics. To act rightly is therefore a creative endeavour, that refers to contexts, and may deal with “the rare, the unusual, the highly specific”.<sup>23</sup> Virtues are often referred to as being situated in some kind of tradition or narrative, opposed to being purely situated in an objective natural law. The helpfulness of rigid boundaries is, therefore, disputed. They offer the basis of safe forms of practice to some, but can be paternalistic, work against the aims of a profession, and distance young people from

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22 John McDowell, “Virtue and reason,” in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 141–162.

23 Phronesis has four elements: the wants and goals of the agent which provide the context for reasoning; the “major premise” that doing or having something is good or contributes to flourishing for self or others; the ‘minor premise’ where a person judges that this is an occasion that works towards the fulfilment of the major premise; and finally to act in a way that is consistent with the major and minor premise. Faith praxis finds expression in our daily conduct of life and is formed through our experiences, the crisis we encounter, the relationships in which we find ourselves, and the environment in which we work and live. This is why we talk of lived faith; Ian Nell, *Together in God’s Theatre: Practical theology in an African context* (Wellington: CLF Publishers, 2021), 15.



adults when they may benefit from a closer relationship.<sup>24</sup> Character cannot be seen separately from practices and has to be demonstrated.

A practice is a:

coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realised while trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>25</sup>

Volf and Bass<sup>26</sup> define *Christian* practices as “patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ.” In our study we used practice as a lens, aligned to MacIntyre’s perception of internal motivation for achieving standards of excellence, but we use the term ‘practice’ a bit broader, not only referring to socially established cooperative human activity, but also less established human activities in a certain context as well – and not only cooperative activity, but also individual activity in a particular social context. This helps us connect to how young people develop at the own pace in relation to living a Christian life, yet within dynamic contexts which influence such development morally, socially, and spiritually. Here we understand Christian practice as acting rightly in a certain social context as a Christian, so that goods internal to the live of a Christian are realised. This is further developed later.

## Methodology: Reflection on our method

The overarching research design employed has been qualitative. Methodically, a comparative study between South Africa and the Netherlands through means of a literature study and empirical interviews with young adults between the ages of 19–30 years old was conducted.

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24 Hart, “The reality of relationships with young people in caring professions.”

25 A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 187.

26 Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, (eds.), *Practicing theology: Beliefs and practices in Christian life* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

The respondents were informed by a letter detailing the procedure, data management and their rights. Participants then signed an informed consent. The interviews were treated confidentially, meaning that the names of persons or places were anonymised in transcripts and stored in a safe digital environment.

As noted earlier, this was a pilot study conducted towards investigating possibility for a larger study resulting in our focus being on our undergraduate theology students whom we have easier access to in a national lockdown. We realize that by this method we only encouraged students' self-reflections on what they consider to be their character considering the Christian faith. We did not ask others to describe the character formation of the student, nor did we do observant participations to see how the student's express character in a certain situation. Nonetheless, we think the self-reports and reflections of the students<sup>27</sup> gives us insight in what is at stake when considering the character formation of these young adults in the 21st century.

Purposive sampling was employed resulting in sixteen theology students from varying denominational backgrounds in the two contexts being interviewed. These youth varied in gender and race. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic; virtual and face to face structured interviews through use of an interview questionnaire (addendum A) were used.

Thematic data-analysis through use of ATLAS ti software was employed. Here data was thematically coded according to themes gained from the questions posed in the interviews, like convictions about Christian life as practice, crucial attitudes and virtues, character and crisis, character formation. First the two researchers coded the own data, and then one of the researchers compared both data around the theme of the crucial attitudes and virtues.

## Findings

What we learnt from young adults:

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27 A. McLuhan, "Character Problems as Collective Behavior." *Symbolic Interaction* 43, no. 4 (2020):657–691.

### **The practice of Christian life – focused on Christian life as the main practice**

In this study, we align our understanding of exemplars in moral conversion to the Christian practices we found important to our participants. In this case, studying character formation in the light of faith, means that we asked the respondents about their faith and Christian life.<sup>28</sup> Christian life is the practice that is at stake in this study. How does Christian life interact with the character of a young adult, what do they consider as an excellent aim to reach at, and how do young adults embody Christian life during times of crisis.

Firstly, *Christian life is a matter of love*. Participants understand the Christian life as an expression of “love for God and one’s neighbour as oneself. There is no knowledge of the self without knowledge of God. It is in the face of the neighbour that we come to terms with God”. The Christian life, in its essence, is life with the triune God made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: a life of faith, hope, and charity, exercised in prayer, worship, and discipleship.<sup>29</sup> Love then is founded in one’s “belief in Jesus Christ and try to life in a good way. Which means with a focus on others and not only on yourself.” The respondents, in particular the Dutch respondents, make an explicit contrast with non-Christians here. Respondents said: “Being a Christian means active participation. A Christian has the task to follow Jesus, which means activity, exercising, and reflectivity. Being Christian also includes a way of looking to the other. Try to understand the other ... it is more than just being culturally Christian”.

Secondly, *Christian life means having a basic trust*.

D: I think Christian faith provides answers to certain fundamental questions of life, including those of the meaning of life. You have a certain foundation, a certain confidence from which you can live. And also if your own emotions can sometimes rage, I was talking about

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28 George Berthold, “*Christian Life and Praxis: The Centuries on Love*” in Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 397–413; Reinhard Hütter, “The Christian Life,” in John Webster et al (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 285–305.

29 Simon Chan, *Spiritual theology: A systematic study of the Christian life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

balance, and I think God is the most balanced being there is, and then it's really nice if you can turn to him.

Here, participants reflect that at the heart of being a Christian one trusts in a faithful God despite who you are, where you come from and what resources you have. It is this virtue that unites Christians globally as is evident in two cohorts of youth here.

Thirdly, *Christian life means a way beyond own subjectivity.*

E: "I now notice in my environment that young people that I spend a lot of time with, that they discover: it is actually not all of what I want and if I can argue it and then I just do it, for example about sexuality. But I just really want to do what Jesus asks of me."

Christian life is being actively engaged and intentional about my relationship with God, other Christians, and those around me.<sup>30</sup> It is a daily and persistent quest. So, love for God, the other and the self, as well as basic trust colour the goods of Christian life. This was evidenced through both cohorts and their expressions of care for the other.

*Faith and character formation embedded in crisis.*

Bearing in mind that this study was conducted during the global Covid-19 pandemic, it was interesting to notice that participants did not solely refer to crisis as this pandemic. Many participants shared varying types of crises and resistance that they believe interact with their character. If they did not refer to a situation of crisis themselves, we asked them about it. Not all had to deal with personal crisis, and some refer to crisis of peers or more general world crisis. However, many examples given by the respondents on the theme of demonstrating character and the formation of character speak of tense situations in which they were engaged, such as, problems at home, bullying, burn out, crisis through studying theology, through church policy. Questions rose, like should they follow their own feelings, or try to act as expected, or how to demonstrate character between the desire of self-giving and the limitations needed, or how to integrate conflicting theological knowledge.

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30 Chan, *Spiritual theology*.

Common crisis in both contexts South Africa and the Netherlands revolved around sexuality, university challenges/ burn out/ family. We explore specific categories below.

### *1. Crisis in personal life*

Faith exercised and grown through resilience was evident in the cohort we studied. We mention one illustrating quote on how someone had to find his way, how he demonstrates character in personal crisis and at the same time is also formed through the crisis. We also hear how several values and virtues are relevant at the same time.

R: Yeah, the idea that you've always been different, I think that's such a terrible word, different, but it fits best. In my first logbook, we had to write about role models. For me, two immediately came to the fore. Youth leaders from the past. One that could fool around and play with me and makes me a rowdydow. And another who occasionally just took me on her lap, like, stay small for a while. I also have those two connected in the process of working towards my coming out. (...) And therein lies a very large part of my character building. That sort of figuring out who I actually am is associated with a lot of character traits. In my opinion, it is in any case accompanied by justice, doing justice to myself, but also to others. Because the moment I am not honest with others, I am not honest with myself, and vice versa. So, it has something to do with honesty again. But also, with courage. I mean such a coming out takes courage. uhm. And at the same time, it's also stuff that's kind of become a forced part of my character. Because I saw no other way.

Later, this respondent connected this doing justice to God. His coming out was also doing justice to God who created him. Crisis like these affected the faith of young adults seeming to for the most part, strengthening their faith. This is further evidence through hearing:

“I stopped going to church then and in that I learnt how to form a relationship with God outside of other people saying, how I should do it.”

“Loss of friend – proved to me that I actually had faith, you know that I actually trusted God in some way, shape or form to be with me and to take care of me and to have my back. “

“I recognised I guess that God had established a reputation of being faithful throughout my life.”

## *2. Crisis in church context*

Faith formation is the central task of the faith community. Youth identity and faith formation take place within community because there is no faith that is not awakened and formed in the matrix of relationship, language, ritual, and symbol. Participants in this study report crisis situations in their own lives, but they also reflect on crisis that shapes the attitudes of peers or more general crisis in which the respondent must act. The two-core crisis related to church in both contexts were noted as “Dealing with one’s sexuality and how the church responds to that; exploring their own identity and fighting to be heard in ecclesial spaces”. In both contexts sexuality included being part of the LGBTQI community. Churches were not prepared to journey alongside the young adults as they wrestled with their own sexuality and identity. Participants reported negatively been discouraged by such a lack of church voice, but also positively being encouraged to explore their own faith amid church silence.

## *3. Crisis in societal contexts*

There were a few contextual differences on how youth experience societal crisis. In South Africa, crisis was linked to one’s socio-economic situation and wellbeing; expressed as being a part of “child headed households; how single parent households sort of shape people; unemployment; losing loved ones especially fathers; violence in schools and dealing with divorce”. In the Netherlands, crisis was linked to one’s connection to broader society; expressed as negotiating “standards on social media; concern with the environment; social injustice and the transition phase of being emerging adults; experience that the world is not as shiny as thought when they were children, experiences with bullying.”

All the above crises were reflected on within the context of how the church responded or supported these young people. To many, the crisis was that the church did not respond sufficiently resulting in them growing towards

their owned faith and relationship with God. This has been reflected in all three spheres above as faith crisis. Despite context, the faith of young Christians and their success in life are impacted when the church remains silent or disengaged with regard to the issues they are facing.<sup>31</sup>

### *Central attitudes and virtues in crisis or resistance*

As noted earlier in this article, character consists of a collection of virtues and attitudes aiming for the good. In the interviews, the respondents refer to a lot of important virtues and attitudes. We list the categories that we analysed. Narratives on crisis and resistance stimulated speaking about attitudes and virtuous, although the mentioned attitudes and virtuous also have a broader scope.

#### *a. Helpfulness*

The first cluster of attitudes and virtues that are mentioned is a good, helpful approach to others. Related codes are helping others, being there for others, sharing with others, fellowship, hospitality. Some relate these references with a central word in the Christian tradition: charity; others speak about love in a more general way.

#### *b. Love for yourself*

What is remarkable is that in some interviews, both in the Netherlands and South Africa, love for yourself is mentioned as an important healthy attitude. Partly, as a correction of focussing (too much) on the needs of others, but also in relation to doing justice to the self. The self, as your identity, created by God.

#### *c. Tolerance*

The third cluster relates to the plurality people live in. Plurality in religion or non-religion, in ethnicity, in sexual orientation, in convictions. This cluster gets a specific focus on the importance of creating space for inclusiveness. This is mentioned in both countries, in particular inclusiveness towards LGBTQI+ people.

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31 S. Weber, The necessity of intergenerational dialogue on social justice within the South African church. Powers, inequalities and vulnerabilities: Impact of globalization on children, youth and families and on the mission of the church (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2020); <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis>.

*d. Respect*

In the interviews in South Africa respect are mentioned by several people. Respecting parents, approaching people with respect, but also criticising a minister who did not speak about people respectfully. Although there might be overlap with tolerance, we categorized it separately, because the term is not only used in context of plurality, but also in relation to roles, and in a more general way. One of them explicitly connects it with crisis, respecting a father, although the father was absent in his life.

*e. Courage and doing justice.*

In this cluster we connect courage, doing justice and honesty. These virtues and attitudes are present in narratives on crisis and resistance. In the tradition of virtue ethics, courage and doing justice are separate virtues, but in the interviews, it became clear that a collection of these, including honesty, resonates in the reconstructions of character amidst crisis and resistance. Courage is the virtue that are coded most often in the interviews in which the emerging adults reflect on themselves. It takes courage to speak up, come out, and stand. They search for ways to do justice to others who live or think differently, to listen, to help, and to ask questions. Being honest about who you are and want to be calls for one to be courageous.

*f. Temperance and thoughtfulness*

Temperance and thoughtfulness are clustered because they all relate to finding a balance and certain practical wisdom (phronesis). Temperance is a virtue when the respondents speak about dealing with crisis situations. Although all the respondents do not explicitly mention the concept temperance themselves, we use this classical virtue consisting in finding the optimal mean between being determined too much and too little by underlying emotions. We found this virtue present in quotations on balancing between care for others and the self, or between mildness/meekness and having principles.

We relate temperance with thoughtfulness and that enables one to choose the right (i.e., the virtuous) action, in the context concerned and in view of the telos. Thoughtfulness and discernment in context relate to phronesis. The reason we add stability to this cluster is that for the respondent who emphasized this attitude, it is related to thoughtfulness.



*f. Hope*

In relation to the first cluster, we mentioned love that is connected to the Christian narrative of charity. Love is one of the theological virtues. Forgiveness is another important virtue in Christian tradition, but because it is spelled out in only one interview, we leave it for now and will continue with the theological virtue ‘hope’. In three interviews in South Africa, respondents refer to living from hope, when it comes to financial struggles. This theological virtue is not as apparent in the Dutch interviews.

*g. Faith*

Faith is a broad term and used in many ways in the interviews. We were looking for character in response to and in the light of God. All kind of attitudes and virtues are motivated by what the Gospel is about, helping people, taking a risk or justice, hope, etc. And character is not based on one virtue, but on a complex interplay of virtues. In a way, this complex interplay resonates in the word ‘faith’, if faith is not only a conviction but embodied in the attitudes and virtues people (try to) live. In the interviews, faith relates in three ways to crisis, namely, a) having a faith crisis or quest. Doubting about what you believed and not knowing what will come out of this; b) Having faith as a helpful source, and orientation in crisis or resistance. During crisis people find strength through faith, and c) It is because of crisis that faith grows, trust in God increases, or the consciousness of this trust increases. Faith can be a theological virtue. Faith as an attitude becomes visible in b and c.

Some participants explicitly mention that becoming Christian themselves resulted in a more virtuous life aimed for and related concrete choices in life, but for most, it was the development of ownership/agency in moral acting that could be considered as a conversion.

## **Character formation**

### **1. Development through age/time as well as through the situation**

Thus far we have explained convictions respondents have about Christian faith, and how this resonates with virtues and attitudes they try to live. In this section, we argue that for most of the respondents the internal

transformation, which is how we interpreted moral conversion, is part of a transition process through age and situation. In a way, adolescence and the phase of emerging adulthood is addressed by the respondents as a transition phase, which includes transformation through crisis. When it comes to growth, gaining age matters in the opinion of the respondents, as well as new experiences, taking responsibility for oneself when no longer living with parents, gaining more experience, and in particular crisis experiences. There is an expected movement from self/individuating faith/morality toward caring for the other and owning your faith.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. Reflexivity

Reflexivity through critical reflection is to be considered as the most important skill and even source for character formation. Formation through critical reflection is a quite dominant source in the interviews. Here we need to say that we are aware that our respondent group are students. In a way they are trained in critical reflection, and it also is part of their self-perception resulting in the dominance of this source for formation might be influenced by our response group, and as such be a limitation of the study.

## 3. Active engagement with (Christian) practices as well as (Christian) exemplars, group participation

We have noted earlier that we do not separate exemplars in moral conversion from the act of Christian practice in this study. Prayer, Bible reading and engagement or active involvement and fellowship with others were the common practices in both cohorts informing one's Christian life. We should note that these Christian practices were not practiced apart from the virtues they deem important nor the contextual realities they

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32 “(...) H: yes, it is and I think that has happened a bit more with all things. Also that I have grown older, but also that after such an experience you start to think better. What more consequences you can see, which you don't always say before you're 20 or something. But that experience has taught me to moderate everything a bit more. A little more in the middle, more in the right balance than before. Looking for more in the middle than going completely for something. At least I still go for things completely, but I'm in that point myself now more often at No. 1 than the other. (...)”

face. Instead, participants engage such practices as they wrestled with their particular crisis

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The core research question explored in this article was: if and how emerging adults live out any specific values and virtues (character) and change in their moral attitude from a Christian perspective.

We have learned from this study that conversion suggests an existential turn into another direction. Discussing character formation in the light of Christian faith, however, shows that moral changes and transformation are present in the lives of emerging adults, due to new experiences and growth in reflection. Both getting older, as well as exploring other contexts and dealing with new situations are mentioned in this regard. In this sense, character formation and moral conversion are linked to moral development and this development encompasses change and transformation. This change or transformation is expressed by a search for temperance as well as a balance between virtues, a balance between love for the other for example and love for yourself or a balance between principles and mildness. This balance deepens the conversion in the lives of young Christian adults. Churches who are intentional about enhancing the character alongside the faith of its young people cannot neglect journeying alongside them as they wrestle with their sexual orientation. Cloete argues that the sexual development of teenagers is one of the most important areas of their journey into adulthood and can easily be influenced by media messages on sex and sexuality. In this sense sex and sexuality can also be viewed as theological issues which faith communities need to address.

In theory, there is an enormous debate about different kinds of moral development, including value education, moral education, virtue education (Sanders, Althoff). We could not distinguish all these nuances in our data. In practice it is intertwined. However, we had a particular focus on significant values that the emerging adults tried to exemplify in their lives which has an element of action and reflection. Virtue is a particular discourse with a historical tradition (Aristotle, Aquinas, etc.), but this study shows that classical virtues, like courage or temperance, are complemented

by other central values, like respect or tolerance. It is remarkable that in both contexts acting inclusively towards the LGBTQ+ community was thematized and seemed to function as an identity marker. When a church community did not live this inclusiveness, this was criticized. When a community lives it, this was embraced. Howard-Snyder and McKaughan called this relational faith stating that for you to have faith in someone for something is for you to be disposed to rely on them to come through with respect to it, with resilience in the face of challenges to doing so, because of your positive stance toward their coming through. Here, a faithful person is one who is worthy of faith being trustworthy, reliable, loyal, steadfast, constant, and so on.

That context matters becomes clear in this similarity. The topic of inclusiveness is present in both contexts and influences reflections on plurality and tolerance. That context matters also becomes clear between both contexts, South Africa, and the Netherlands. The virtue of hope was in particularly expressed in the South African context and often related to personal (socio-economical) crisis. In the Dutch context, the non-Christian is present in the reflection on a virtuous life. The Christian focus on the other, as well as basic trust in God influences in their opinion; the way they live in comparison. This of course does not say anything about non-Christians, but about the self-understanding of these respondents, and the context of their character formation. Seibel and Nel argue that the ‘relevance of the church’s mission and message must be rediscovered and re-appropriated in cultural forms that speak to the members of each new generation’, and that the socialization ‘and experience offered to the members of each rising generation must connect with their cultural reality’.<sup>33</sup> The church should take the holistic moral conversion process seriously. This then includes moral choices, reasoning and argument of emerging adults making it difficult for the church to merely offer simplistic alternatives.

Almost all respondents reflected on character formation in relation to crisis or resistance, either personal, societal or a crisis/resistance in church.

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33 Cory L. Seibel, and Malan Nel. “Generation X, intergenerational justice and the renewal of the traditioning process.” *HTS: Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2010): 1.

A crisis for these young people in the end seems to be an ultimate situation to demonstrate and develop character and in particular the virtue of own faith.

### Limitations and recommendations

We are aware that attitude/disposition is difficult to investigate in empirical studies and the limitation of ours is that we mainly have reflections on the character of respondents. These self-reflections, however, gave us an idea about the aims young people formulate in relation to being a Christian and living a Christian life and the examples they mentioned gave an impression on how they perceived their character in concrete situations.

We interviewed theological students and are aware that this is only a small group in society, and that we had only a small sample. However, knowing more about how theological students deal with their character (formation) might help faculties in their education. Faculties do play a role in the character formation of their students and is a playground for demonstrating character as well. Furthermore, the first results might also help churches in their ministry to emerging adults, how is the church a context for character formation, and what quest do emerging adults have about their character in light of Christian faith?<sup>34</sup>

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34 Both authors (Weber and Sonnenberg) contributed equally to this research article.

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