

Today's New Young Adult

LT. GEN. THOMAS S. MOORMAN

IT IS A pleasure to welcome you all to the Air Force Academy—for your early morning devotional in the Cadet Chapel this morning—for your meetings here today. I know what a busy schedule you have, and I hope that you will be able to take some time to see the Academy while you are here—and particularly to learn more about our cadets.

I know that all of you are concerned with the world of the young adult, particularly with the young, unmarried soldier, sailor and airman. I am too, particularly with the young cadet. During my time as Superintendent of the Air Force Academy, it has been my privilege to observe much of young adult life.

Too often we hear and read about delinquent young people and fail to really appreciate the fine caliber of young adults who surround us. Actually, the world of the young adult is more different than before in history. While not without its problems, I feel it is blessed with opportunity.

There are some 20 million young adults in the United States. The United States population profile shows that one-half of our nation's population is below the age of 25. Thus, young adulthood has become a distinct period of life. It is a time of transition from adolescence. There are many struggles for identity or self-image, usefulness, and the struggle for ideology and beliefs.

We must recognize the young adult (in varying degrees) as:

1. A person in transition.
2. A person becoming an individual.
3. A person adjusting.

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4. A person developing a system of beliefs and values.

5. A person making commitments.

Let me describe a typical young adult as I have observed him in the world of the cadet at the Air Force Academy. He is testing, experimenting, exploring, trying on things for size—in order to make decisions about them. This is not to suggest that the cadets are all alike. To the contrary. They are going through transition, and all these struggles have an extremely wide range of diversity depending upon their "own self image." Their backgrounds show widely differing talents and interests, varied home and community backgrounds, all of which play a part in their personality make-up.

But with all this diversity, today's young adults do have common history and experience, values and beliefs. The things they hold in common serve to hold them together and to place them in contrast to preceding generations. Their common experience is vastly different from our fathers' and, in many cases, from our own. What they know of a way of life are cold wars, nuclear weapons, co-existence, economic stability, abundance and affluence, sprawling cities, interstate travel, mobility, the decay of the inner city, population explosion, mass communication, space travel and exploration, the technological-automated-computerized era, personal freedom and experimentation, civil rights demonstrations, and a world in on-going revolution. Out of this common history and experience of these young people has come a common system of values, attitudes, and beliefs which is strikingly dissimilar to our older adult system.

Now, what are some of the values and attitudes of these young people? The young adult of today faces the

future knowing that he will make mistakes. He accepts this where previous generations may not have. He realizes that his course in a new world is uncharted and that he is not well equipped for the voyage. He is not content with what he finds in the present establishment. He is idealistic—he wants to help people. He demands quality, value, meaning, purpose, and authenticity from everything about him. He is an activist. He reacts violently to what he believes is “phony” in society and in the church.

These young adults, as cadets, are devoted to inquiry, doubt, and questioning. They expect and accept new truth and information. As children of a changing world, they expect change. They are engaged in developing their own value systems and they will rank their values differently than we do.

The ethic of the young adult places a far greater value on relationships than we do. There is more emphasis on complete honesty, frankness, and realism and less value on niceness and ritualized properness.

Decision-making is different. The young adult has fewer absolutes to which he is so committed that they cannot be changed, reversed, or discarded. He does not always require that behavior be logical, because each situation is different and requires an original response. Frequently he is a pragmatist.

The cadet has lived in a pluralistic society and has learned to tolerate, accept, and even relate to persons whose life style may deviate from his own. He tries to recognize those who vary from the majority interpretations—recognize them as persons—as fellow human beings with differences.

I feel that it is extremely important that we recognize that there is in America today a distinct and, to a large extent, self-contained, young adult culture. It is equally important that we understand that it will not necessarily pass away. The young adults who are

a part of it will change, but will probably not become just like us when they get older. They are different, a kind of people who live in a new age and generally judge our age, its ways, its piety, and its institutions as either inadequate or irrelevant.

I recall a speaker who once graphically described the changes taking place in the world. His statement was that those of us who were born before 1930 are “old fogies.” This has remained with me. This generation of young adults feels this way. For they are creatures of their age.

There are many young churchmen in this new generation. Although they seem to be deserting the institutional church, they have not deserted their faith in a dynamic, powerful and loving creation. They need our support as they work through the meaning of faithfulness in this strange new world. They need the assurance that they can turn to the church for aid, support, and affirmation in their struggles.

We need the help of young adults to redefine the continuing role of the church. To help us, they must clarify and sharpen their own concepts of the Christian life and the mission of the church.

This is our situation as laymen in our relation to the whole world of the young adult. Here is our threat, our challenge, and, perhaps, our opportunity. Faced with young adults who are often suspicious and rebellious and doubtful that the church really has any deep concern or understanding of them, what are we going to do? Are we prepared to listen? Are we ready to become adult guarantors who are interested, who are willing to enter into the life of this young generation as socially conscious, mature adults who can offer creative alternatives in their perplexity? Do we really want to serve this generation? If so, there are certain things we must do! We must be willing to pay the price of becoming profoundly

involved with these young people and their world. We must be prepared to search for new patterns and free ourselves from old structures. Effective pioneering in their area will be uncomfortable and demanding and even subject to criticism from those wedded to traditional approaches of the church's ministry to young adults. As we move into the world of the young adult, we must be able to respond to his needs, his issues, his questions and his pains.

I find that the young adult is often disenchanted with the institutional church. He is questioning the nature of the work of the church, and has often disengaged himself from it. A Denver survey showed that only one-sixth of the young adult population has any current church tie. They see the church as a great institution that is serving an older generation, another culture, speaking in language that is sentimental and naive.

The young adult is not rebelling against the church; he is just not concerned with it. Its message to him is full of incomprehensible sayings and sentiments or outmoded superstitions. He feels that it does not speak well to vital issues. The young adult is looking for insights into the dilemmas that preoccupy him.

We must sense the reality of human needs in young adults and must learn to come to terms realistically with contemporary, urban, secular life, if we are to be real servants of this generation.

As concerned adults, we must become involved with the young adults. We must enter into their struggles, their agonies, their questions, and their triumphs. We must instruct our young adults in how to live in this new time, how they can serve this new possibility in history.

We must listen to them. We must attempt to look at religion and church through their eyes. We must be patient. We must be helpful

Perhaps what I am saying can best be illustrated by telling about "The Redcoats and the Coon-skinners," two forces who fought each other during the American Revolution. The Redcoats, conditioned by tradition, were content to do things in terms of traditional forms and styles. Whenever the going got tough, they tightened their ranks and banged on their drums louder and louder. But the Coon-skinners, conditioned by their environment, looked at the situation as it really was. They used what was most available to them—the trees and rocks. The Redcoats, however, ignored these natural formations. They could only look for open country that suited their mode of warfare. As a result of their drastic mistake, the Redcoats became dead men.

It is dead men who try to capture an error and repeat it over and over again. Alive men are always re-evaluating; looking at life from different angles; seeing life as it really is and not through the eyes of memory. Dead men are prone to forget what is really there and always worry about what should be there. Alive men are present with and in the situation. Dead men seek to set up church programs to justify the existence of the church. Alive men seek to identify with the life of the young adult. Dead men seek to measure their ministry by answering the question: "How many were present last Sunday?" Alive men seek to answer the question, "Where are the young adults and what are they doing?" The answers cannot be found in the chapel or the chapel annex. They can only be found where the young adults are and around the issues which concern them.

This concept of "presence" spells out our mission in terms of lively re-evaluation. Therefore, we must remain open to any suggestion, any evaluation, any technique, and understanding that will make our ministry more relevant and more creative. Even as Christ was "present" in the human situation, we must

attempt to be present whenever and wherever there is a need. We are aware of the fact that every moment in history is different from every other moment, and that each one makes its own special individual demands which cannot be reduced to any rule. But, we

are also aware of the fact that thought which does not lead to action is barren.

We must continue to act, to be "present," to listen, and to re-evaluate. This kind of theological rationale thrusts us into a position where we must even risk failure in order to make our witness.

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