

Imagine If “Church” Was Selected as “Word of the Year”

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Luke 2:39-50

Last Sunday, the *Oxford English Dictionary* announced the 2023 Word of the Year. You probably heard about it.

Each year, the OED editors pick a word that they believe captures the mood of the time. This year, the word wasn’t parasocial, heat dome, or even Swiftie, which would have been my guess.

No. This year’s word was . . . Rizz. Yes, Rizz. I had to look it up, too. To be in on this trendy buzzword, you apparently have to be a Gen Z-er who spend lots of time on Tic-Tok, being, well, RIZZ. That isn’t me.

Apparently, rizz is short for cha-rizzzz-ma, or having style, charm, or sex appeal. All the buzz about rizz caught my eye while I was working on sermon. Yes, it really is connected beyond the click-bait factor.

Since at least the 1970s when I was in youth groups, the church as a whole as mimicked the word-of-the-year approach to getting the younger generations’ attention. Hire a rizzly, energetic youth worker who leads crazy games with shaving cream and water balloons. Bring in dynamic speakers and loud praise bands. Rizz things up. If the rizzly kids come, all the rest will follow.

But what really happened?

Well, all those young people, whether or not they had rizz, kept slip-sliding—or stampeding—away.

Since about 1990, the proportion of young people in the United States who self-identify as Christian has fallen from about 80% to fewer than half. Many fewer participate in a place of worship. The percentage of young adults who describe their religion as “none” has grown from about 5% to about 45%.¹

Religion is definitely not “rizz” these days, and “church” isn’t teed up to be Oxford English Dictionary’s next word of the year.

If I’m honest, that’s just fine. Let rizz and its next incarnations have all their rizz—their 15 minutes of fame.

I’m much more concerned about a deeper, long-lasting challenge. I’ve spent most of my career studying and writing about young people, families, faith, church, spirituality, and thriving. I’ve fielded lots of

¹ Burge, R. (2022, April 13) How America’s youth lost its religion in the 1990s. Religion News Service. <https://religionnews.com/2022/04/13/how-americas-youth-lost-its-religion-in-1990s/>

questions about young people in the church. But if you probe, many of the questions aren't really about young people. Instead, they are primarily veiled worries about the institution's survival. If young people and young families don't come, what will happen to our church, our institution?

Because of this actual—usually unstated—focus, I fear that the church at large has squandered at least two generations by putting our energy into getting young people to look at and listen to us. We've focused on making them become what we wanted them to be—or thought they ought to be. In retrospect, we could have been much more effective (and faithful) if we had, instead, invested much more of ourselves in listening to them and seeing them as fellow travelers through these challenging, changing times.

It's well past time, then, to refocus our attention on talking with, listening to, and learning from "our kids." And, to be clear, when I say "our kids," I don't just mean those in our own families; I mean all those we vow to nurture and care for when we baptize them.

To begin this focus, I invite us to ponder a central question offered by my cherished mentor Peter Benson. He was president of Search Institute, where I've worked for more than 30 years. In a TEDx talk² he did a couple of years before he died, he described how he spoke with hundreds of parents and adults around the country about young people. He always asked this question: "*What is your HIGHEST aspiration for our young?*"

He continued:

No one has ever said, "Oh, this child of mine, my fondest wish is that they will ace statewide math and science tests when they are 16." I've never heard anybody say, "My fondest wish is that this young person will help make America more competitive in the global economy." No, when you actually listen to people's dreams for our kids, you hear: Kids who experience joy. Kids who are connected and engaged. Kids who fall in love with their life and all of life. Kids with kindness. Compassion. Generosity. That, my friends, is the language of thriving.

As I listen to Peter, I think: Those words preach! Aren't they language of the spirit? They're theological . . . ethical . . . Don't they reflect a lot of what we are about as we walk together at Mayflower along the Jesus path, as we like to say around here?

What might it mean for our kids to thrive and, in particular, to thrive spiritually?

Before presuming to offer ideas, let's first celebrate the many things we're already doing well here at Mayflower and in our individual homes and extended families. I also believe the best ideas will come not from my sermon, but through more dialogue, particularly with our young people and their families. . . .

² <https://youtu.be/TqzUHcW58Us?si=bS092fQ9eDTg1G19>

That said, I have a few thought triggers to open up possibilities.

First, we need to worry less about passing on OUR faith and more about creating safe and challenging spaces in which young people can explore, discover, and live into their OWN faith.

My mentor Peter loved to quote Plutarch, a Greek philosopher and historian who was born about 15 years after Jesus was crucified. Plutarch said: “Youth are not vessels to be filled, but fires to be lit.” You may have heard other similar proverbs. It’s unfortunate that you probably haven’t heard them used to describe traditional Sunday school.

Youth are not vessels to be filled, but fires to be lit.” Actually, that may be one of the best metaphors for understanding faith and spiritual formation. Scripture describes each of us being made in the image of God. This sense of the divine within each of us, including children and youth, calls us to really see and listen to young people. Maybe that’s part of the symbolism of following the star to Bethlehem or listening to the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple.

What might this mean for young people’s spiritual nurture from the time their born until the time they are launched into adulthood or beyond? Perhaps it renews the importance of attending to and taking seriously young people’s passions, sparks, longings, and questions as part of who they are and who they are created to be and become.

Here’s a second thought: I love Mayflower’s emphasis on “walking the talk,” which is vital for our kids too. It’s equally important, I propose, to get better at “talking the walk.”

We learn by doing. In addition, we interpret and internalize our doing through reflection, dialogue, story-telling, and placing our actions into a larger context and narrative. Without these opportunities—particularly in a caring, just community—our learning can get off track. As Mark Twain said: “If a cat sits on a hot stove, that cat won’t sit on a hot stove again. That cat won’t sit on a cold stove either. That cat just won’t like stoves.” I’m afraid that’s what has happened with the church. A lot of people have been burned, and they just avoid all churches, not just those, you might say, with unattended burners.

From a developmental perspective, Jesus’ Q&A session with the temple leaders is a lot like any precocious 12 year old’s questions. What’s most striking is that Jesus wasn’t off in a Sunday school or youth room; he was sitting in the center of the temple with the learned elders.

And that scenario probably wasn’t unusual. As I understand it, there was a tradition that the questions of the youngest were the first to be discussed. Moreover, they were treated with respect, since asking questions was considered one of the highest forms of learning.³ It’s a bit like “talking your walk.”

³ See, for example, <https://www.jerusalemerspective.com/2673/>

My third, and probably my most important thought, is actually a common theme around Mayflower. We and our young people are most likely to thrive if we place relationships at the center of our theology, faith, and spiritual lives.

A couple of Sundays ago, Rev. Todd Lippert emphasized this idea. He explored what it meant to be an inviting church, particularly as we look beyond our walls and tell our story of working for justice.

The question I invite us to consider is: How we are intentionally inviting our children and our youth to be integral to our congregation as a whole and as fellow travelers on the Jesus path?

In the Luke passage that Rita read, Jesus was separated from his parents during the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Some modern interpreters use it as evidence that Mary wasn't keeping track of her kid. Actually, that's probably not what was going on. The story likely reflects the communal or clan society of first-century Judaism. In that culture, Mary knew Jesus was in good hands with other adults who were traveling together and were caring for him as though he was their own—since, in many ways, he actually was!

We somehow need to reclaim and live into that vision—that baptismal calling. What if all of us in this faith village were attentive to and really knew the names, gifts, and passions of all the children and teenagers who are connect to this community of faith?

What if parents, Sunday school teachers, and youth leaders weren't the only ones young people could go to when they encounter a vexing question about God, war, the future, sex, gender identity, or death? What if they wanted to talk with someone else here who they trusted and knew had life experience that might give them a helpful perspective? I know some of that likely happens already, and I bet some of the most powerful faith formation already occurs in those conversations.

Forget the Razz!

We need to stop trying to lure young people to church. Let's forget the "razz." Instead, as people on the Jesus path, let's put our energy into listening to and walking with young people, living our own faith, telling our stories, and being in relationship with young people and with each other.

But first, let's pause to ask ourselves, each other, and young people:

“So, what *is* our shared vision for young people on the Jesus path with us? What are our and their highest aspirations?”

Once those seeds start to sprout, what might we need to be and become to nurture that vision into reality with and for our kids . . . and all kids?