

This is what I believe!

This is the seventh and last part of an ongoing series exploring milestones. Milestones are important points that you reach throughout life. These articles are exploring how we, as a Church community, can share in these important celebrations. Last time we looked at Lower High School, and this month we will look at the other end of those High School years, up to leaving school.

The last few years of school are an interesting time for most young people. Some know exactly what they wish to do for the rest of their lives, and study hard to try and achieve entry into courses or traineeships that will help them reach their goal. Others have no idea and will still be exploring their options long after they finish school. Some are frustrated with schooling and leave early to look for employment. Whilst these are generalisations, I would like to recognise that this is a stage of life where young people all of a sudden realise that their decisions and actions made at this time will impact upon the rest of their lives.

These decisions also expand into the realm of faith and belief. At this stage of life we have moved from sharing the belief of our parents and peers, to questioning everything in our teens, and finally making concrete decisions on what we believe to be true. This does not mean that we won't re-evaluate these beliefs in the future, but that based on the facts before us at this time we come to a number of conclusions. So, how do we recognise this important milestone in our Christian community?

An obvious milestone is that of Confirmation. This really starts to show some of my own bias. I have waited until this age to add 'Confirmation' as I believe it is an important step into a mature faith. Confirmation is about owning the faith for yourself, taking on the promises that may have been made on your behalf at your baptism as a child, and standing before the Christian community to ask for their ongoing support. To do this takes some maturity. As I look back on my own confirmation I have to say how little I really knew about my faith, and how little it actually impacted upon my own livelihood. It was not until my later teenage years that I truly understood what it meant to confirm my faith – a faith that had been openly questioned, challenged, experienced and lived out with all its challenges and celebrations. How can this be done at age 10 or 12?

Another important milestone, which could also be linked with confirmation, is the ability to tell your own spiritual story (testimony). Sitting down and writing your testimony is an important step in owning your own faith. It allows you to reflect on how God has impacted upon your own life and decisions, and most importantly gives an opportunity to share your story and encourage others. Some congregations create an opportunity during the weeks following Easter for this to take place. It is just as important an exercise for the congregation as it assists in allowing the young person to become an individual, and not "Joe Blow son of John and Judy Blow".

Leaving school is also a very important milestone. For some young people it can be very exciting, but for many it brings about insecurity as they wait to get into further study courses, or apply for jobs. Prayer is essential at this time, and it is important to include these young people in our regular intercessions. Two other creative ways to recognise this step may be to hold a special function in your Parish, like a "graduation", to recognise this huge change. Special blessings could be offered, along

with an appropriate gift. Another option is to offer the young person to attend a retreat. There are many places that offer Christian retreats. These can provide a wonderful opportunity for explore options and allow time for prayer and discernment to take place away from the many distractions in life.

Well, this is the last article on milestones, and we have moved from pre-birth into early adulthood. Milestones don't finish at this age! Getting older brings about more significant milestones in our lives – some of great responsibility such as finding a partner, getting married, buying a car or a house, renting for the first time, starting university . . . the list goes on and on, and one person's milestones are slightly different to another's.

Our worshipping communities need to be places where we can celebrate these important stages of life and death, growth and change. I hope that these articles have encouraged you in seeking simple ways of celebrating life together. Often the best part of celebrating any milestone is getting to know each other a bit better, and having some great stories to tell and share with each other.

Michael Armstrong
CEY Ministries.