

Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

Journal Collection: Adolescent Faith Formation



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Best Practices in Adolescent Faith Formation

John Roberto

Faith formation with adolescents in a culture of choice provides a whole new set of challenges for congregations, unlike any that they have faced previously. Carol Lytch in her study of adolescents and church observes, “Passing on faith to the next generation is challenging today in a new way. In fact, ‘passing on the faith’ is no longer the task it used to be. Teens *choose* faith instead. American society has changed to favor individual choice of a highly personal religion that is less tethered to religious traditions and institutions.” (Lytch, 13)

The best practices in adolescent faith formation described in this essay demonstrate that congregations can make a significant difference in the faith lives of young people—today and into their adult lives. “Even with a heightened sense of personal autonomy, even in these times when “believing and belonging” for many Americans means something individual, expressive, and noninstitutional, religious traditions attract and hold teens in new and powerful ways. Teens tend to choose faith when they live in families that “talk the walk” and ‘walk the talk.’ Moreover, church-related teens are most likely to ‘grow up into Christ’ when they belong to congregations that have learned to convey unchanging, eternal truths within a changing ‘culture of choice.’” (Lytch, 14)

The National Study on Youth and Religion (see *Soul Searching*) confirms the impact of congregational efforts to nurture adolescent faith. “It appears that the greater the supply of religiously grounded relationships, activities, programs, opportunities, and challenges available to teenagers, other things being equal, the more likely teenagers will be religiously engaged and invested. Religious congregations that prioritize ministry to youth and support for their parents, invest in trained and skilled youth group leaders, and make serious efforts to engage and teach adolescents seem much more likely to draw youth into their religious lives and to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their young members. ...when it comes to youth, religious congregations...generally “will get back what they invest” and normally not a lot more.” (Smith, 261-62)

What should congregations do to promote the faith maturity of young people? This essay describes best practices for adolescent faith formation drawn primarily from three recent research studies on youth ministry and adolescent faith formation: *Choosing Church* (Carol Lytch), *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* (Thomas East, et al.), and the *Exemplary Youth Ministry Project*.¹ We will also consult the research findings from the ten-year Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project (Mark Yaconelli) on contemplative youth ministry. Each study provides rich insights into adolescent faith life, congregations, and youth ministry, far too many to summarize in this article. For our purposes, we will examine best practices that focus specifically on faith formation.

Best Practice 1. Effective adolescent faith formation involves two movements in the development of religious commitment in youth: socialization and religious experience.

Congregations that both teach youth the Christian way of life (socialization) and create conditions where teens feel they meet God (religious experience) tend to have large numbers of teens who predict that they will continue to be active in the church after they leave home. “The process of faith transmission goes two ways: congregations transmit faith to teens and teens transmit back a revised faith that prompts renegotiation about the faith tradition itself. In this renegotiation, the tradition is vitalized.” (Lytch, 10)

Socialization is a social process—it happens as a person lives in the religious community. It “builds knowledge of the symbols, rituals, narratives, and it includes the habits—such as church attendance, praying, and Bible reading—that compromise the Christian life” (Lytch, 58). Socialization for young people occurs through the example and mentoring of others, education in the Bible and Christian tradition, Sunday worship, and youth meetings and activities.

Lytch notes that “teens with the most consistent exposure to the environment of the church—especially in the areas of church attendance, praying/Bible reading, and knowledge of the tradition—were the most likely to remain in the tradition. When this is coupled with meaningful religious experiences, the degree of religious loyalty increases even more” (emphasis added) (Lytch, 58). The five key variables that directly relate to nurturing young people’s religious commitment are 1) church attendance, 2) praying and/or Bible reading, 3) knowledge of the religious tradition, 4) religious experience, and 5) religious ritual.

Religious Experience is an encounter with God. Lytch observes that “teens reported that they had religious experiences when the regular symbols and rhythms of life were disrupted, intensified, or accented in some way. . . Typically, these religious experiences happened in places that were geographically on the boundaries, in locations away from home—at camp, on retreats, and even in parking lots located literally on the boundaries of the church.” (Lytch, 59)

Religious commitment is “fostered in a circular process by which socialization and religious experience mutually build on one another. Because youth have the symbols, stories, and practices to use

to interpret their experiences as religious, they are enabled to name experiences of God as such. Congregations that both socialize youth into religious traditions and create conditions where teens feel they experience God tend to have teens who exhibit religious commitment.” (Lytch, 198) In fact, young people with the highest degree of commitment to the religious tradition (“unshakable loyalists”) had both *religious experience* and *consistent socialization*.

Lytch makes special note throughout her book of the importance of faith formation with seniors in high school. She found that senior year is a pivotal time for religious commitment. “High school seniors are fortified in their religious commitment when churches encourage them to use the symbols of their tradition to fashion rites of passage to give definition and religious significance to this ambiguous time. When teens reappropriate traditional practices to represent and deepen their personal experiences of God, the tradition is remade and vitalized. Religious loyalty for contemporary teens is a blending of enduring processes (socialization and religious experience) with new emphasis on personal autonomy and choice.” (Lytch, 84)

Best Practice 2. Effective adolescent faith formation offers teens a sense of belonging that ties them into the fellowship of their church, a sense of the comprehensive meaning of the whole of life that is based in religious truth, and opportunities to develop various competencies that assist them as they cross the threshold into adult roles and institutions.

When congregations address three fundamental conditions of human nature—belonging, believing (a sense of meaning), and achieving competence (opportunities to develop competence), they not only attract young people but keep them engaged. “When churches’ ministries with youth include these three components, teens will restructure their time and attention to participate in them. . . Teens participated at highest levels in their churches when they perceived them to offer all three of these components.” (Lytch, 25-26)

Congregations facilitate a sense of **belonging** by building intergenerational relationships in the congregation and peer relationships in youth groups.

“The sense of belonging, more than interesting activities, attracted and held teens in the church. “The friendship factor” along with the structures that support it, are the key variables in teen attachment to their churches.” (Lytch, 35)

Congregations help adolescents make **meaning** out of the various segments of their life experience by “pointing to a ‘ground of being’ (God) on which all other understandings are built. My research finds that when religious institutions seriously address the questions of meaning, teens are attracted to them.” (Lytch, 37) Helping teens make meaning of the whole of life can be woven into teaching, small group discussion, worship, and service projects.

Congregations offer teens the challenge and opportunities to develop **competence**. “Teens were attracted to high goals, standards of excellence, demands worthy of their attention and energy, and rites of passage marking steps toward their adulthood” (Lytch, 37). Opportunities to develop competence include: leadership training, leadership roles in the congregation and youth program, planning programs, speaking in front of a group, and being mentor.

Best Practice 3. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the spiritual life of teenagers and the adults who minister with them through spiritual disciplines and contemplative practices.

Mark Yaconelli, Michael Hryniuk, and their colleagues at The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project have been developing approaches and tools for developing the spiritual life of young people through spiritual disciples and contemplative practices. Through retreats, resources, and mentoring they have worked with congregations to implement a contemplative approach to youth ministry.

The contemplative approach responds directly to the tremendous hunger in young people today for spiritual guides or mentors.

Youth, seeking to enter adulthood, are looking for guides or mentors, who can show them adult forms of life that radiate with the love of Christ. Youth are not simply looking for information about religion—they’re looking for how ideas are embodied, how faith is lived out, how following Jesus impacts an adult’s perspective and actions. They’re looking for adults who embody and

practice their theology with a particular way of life—a way that mirrors the freedom and passion of Jesus Christ. (Yaconelli, 30-31)

Seven Principles of Contemplative Youth Ministry

The project developed seven principles, and their corresponding practices, to describe a contemplative approach to youth ministry that guides the spiritual development of youth. (For a complete description of the seven principles see Chapter 4 in *Growing Souls* by Mark Yaconelli.)

- 1. Sabbath.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry is grounded in a Christian community committed to the sacred balance between work and rest. A life that honors Sabbath rest helps us to be more in touch with our heart and soul, more aware of the Spirit of God and more available for relationships of love.
- 2. Prayer.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry is rooted in desire for intimacy with God in Christ through a life of prayer. We practice and teach many forms of prayer but are particularly committed to regular periods of *contemplative* prayer in order to be healed, inspired and guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. (People) commit to practice contemplative prayer with scripture each day as well as at regular times with their community.
- 3. Covenant Community.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry is practiced within a covenant community of Christian disciples. . . . we encourage, support and practice small covenant groups who sense a common call to spiritual growth through Christian living and ministry to young people. (People) commit to meeting regularly in covenant communities for sharing, prayer, Scripture study and discernment in the service of their ministry to young people.
- 4. Accompaniment.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry is focused on discipleship through the accompaniment of young people. . . . we seek to initiate young persons into mature Christian faith through relationships with elders who join them in living the way of authentic discipleship. . . They offer youth friendship, guidance and

listening hearts as they make the passage through adolescence into spiritual maturity, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

5. **Discernment.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry is guided by discernment. We practice and teach the disciplines of individual and group discernment so as to be fully available and responsive to the movement of God’s grace in our covenant communities, allowing anxiety-driven youth ministry to become Spirit-led youth ministry. (People) seek to learn and practice the spiritual disciplines of discernment as the basis for opening, listening and responding to God’s call in youth ministry.
6. **Hospitality.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry seeks to welcome, bless and joyfully integrate all young people into the whole church community. . . . we seek the full inclusion of young people and the many gifts they bring into every dimension of church life: worship, teaching, proclamation, fellowship and service.
7. **Authentic Action.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry seeks to engage youth and adults in authentic actions that reflect God’s mercy, justice and peace. Communal practices of Sabbath, prayer, discernment and accompaniment find their fulfillment in actions with youth that make visible the gifts of the Holy Spirit. (Yaconelli, 83-86)

Strategies

While there is a great diversity in the ways congregations nurture the spiritual development of young people through the seven principles, there are at least three strategies that shape a congregation’s basic approach.

1. **Infuse a Contemplative Approach:** Congregations infuse spirituality and contemplation into everything they do: youth meetings, retreats, service projects, and so on. Here are several examples from congregations involved in The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project:
 - Offering a special weekly “Sabbath-living” youth meeting with a simple format: conducive meeting room, candles, extended personal sharing,

contemplative prayer (usually *lectio divina*)

- Introducing prayer, silence, and a slower pace to youth group meeting and other youth programs.
 - Teaching specific prayer exercises (nature prayers, breath prayers, *lectio divina*, centering prayer) as part of regular youth meetings or specially designed programs such as retreats.
 - Creating a prayer labyrinth that is walked in silence. In one congregation the high school students constructed the labyrinth in the church courtyard and taught it to the rest of the congregation.
 - Offering regular spiritual development/prayer retreats, such as an annual Lenten retreat experience.
 - Teaching a seven-step process known as a liturgy of discernment (see below), a meeting process that leaves space for groups to listen for God’s voice through prayerful attention to God’s Word and to the life of each group member. The liturgy is a form of prayer as well as a decision-making tool that enables groups to discern God’s call in their ministry to one another and to the community.
 - Offering justice immersion trips and extended service projects that incorporate prayer practices, contemplation, reflection, and discernment.
2. **Develop Adult Mentors:** Congregations nurture adults who model discipleship and contemplation, and who serve as mentors or guides for young people on the spiritual journey. Adult mentors, one-on-one or in small groups, offer youth friendship, guidance and listening hearts. An essential part of The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project is a retreat experience for adult leaders focused on their spiritual life and creating a community of adult mentors who meet regular for sharing, prayer, Scripture study and discernment in the service of their ministry to young people.
 3. **Teach Prayer Practices:** Congregations deliberately and intentionally teach young people practices from the Christian tradition to develop their spiritual lives. The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project emphasized four prayer practices.

- Lectio Divina
 - Centering Prayer
 - The Awareness Examen: A Prayer of Discernment
 - Liturgy for Discernment—involving seven movements: ritual, relating, receiving, ruminating, reflecting, responding, and returning
- (For descriptions of each practice see the Appendix in *Growing Souls* by Mark Yaconelli.)

Impact

What is the impact of a contemplative approach on adults, youth, and the congregation? In his review of their research on congregations from The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, Mark Yaconelli writes about uncovering the hunger for God in adults and youth.

Perhaps the most unanticipated, encouraging, and even heartbreaking discovery was the deep longing for life in the Spirit. It was revealed in the number of youth leaders longing to listen for God; the many youth surprised and delighted to have their souls addressed; the pastors and church elders yearning for someone to give them permission to attend to their own experiences of God. The great secret we uncovered within our work was that youth leaders and youth have souls, and despite the conventional wisdom, these leaders and youth don't need Christian rock bands, or amusement parks, or clever curricula. The secret we discovered is that what they need and desire is God. (Yaconelli, 258)

Through their evaluations and interviews, Yaconelli and his colleagues discovered the impact of a contemplative approach on youth and adults.

- When youth leaders practice the presence of God within their ministries, lives are changed. (Yaconelli, 258)
- When youth ministries pray and attend to God, there is greater patience, generosity, kindness, self-discipline, hope, joy, and love, as well as other fruits of the Spirit. (Yaconelli, 258)
- With regular exposure to spiritual exercises youth began to notice their youth programs felt more centered on God and the spiritual life, and less focused on social and recreational activities. One student commented, "Youth group feels

different...Before it was about friends, not it seems to be about God." (Yaconelli, 33)

- The most frequent comment by young people on the contemplative approach to youth ministry was the transformation in how adults related to them. Young people noticed a new emphasis on hospitality and relationship within their youth ministry programs that invited greater trust in both the congregation and the Christian life. Young people spoke of the adults within their youth ministry as being particularly alive and attentive in a different way than most other adults with whom they came in contact. It was these relationships with "elders" within their faith community that kept young people involved, interested, and even forgiving of their congregations. What seemed most important to young people was feeling welcomed and affirmed by the adults in their churches in a way that allowed a mutual respect and spiritual seeking to emerge. (Yaconelli, 33)
- In evaluating the young people's experience of silence, solitude, and contemplative prayer, a majority of students within the project expressed a desire for continual growth in prayer and spiritual practice. (Yaconelli, 34)
- Young people remarked about the lack of open time and space in their lives and were surprised by the "holy leisure" they encountered in the project's contemplative retreats and in their youth groups. (Yaconelli, 34)
- Other young people felt affirmed by the diversity of prayer within the Christian tradition and found the different forms of prayer encouraging to their own spiritual growth. (Yaconelli, 34)
- There was a widespread desire among youth in our participating churches to integrate spiritual practices into daily life, such as using workout times as times for prayer and meditation, journaling, and setting aside time in the early morning or before bed to practice silent prayer. (Yaconelli, 34)

Best Practice 4. Effective adolescent faith formation equips and engages young people to participate in the life, ministries, and practices of the congregation; and to assume leadership in congregational and youth activities.

A recurring theme in the three research studies is the impact of the congregation upon the faith life of young people and the willingness of the congregation to involve young people as full members of the community. The *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* (EPDYM) study describes it this way:

A parish must be willing to experience the change that comes with being a community with active youth members. This insight is very descriptive of the parish communities that were studied in this project. They were willing to let the young people in their midst become full members in the community. They were willing to put their energy and resources into developing youth ministry. They were willing to let youth be leaders and share in ministries side by side with adults. Most of all, they were willing to truly be in relationship with the youth in their midst. Through this relationship, the community changed and grew. (East, et al., 9)

Specifically the EPDYM study identified the following characteristics of congregations:

- Youth feel at home in the parish are genuinely known and liked by parish members.
- Youth are integrated into the full life of the parish. This involvement of youth in parish ministries and parish activities is planned for, encouraged, and affirmed.
- Youth share in leadership and decision-making in parish committees, ministries, and organizations.
- Youth have opportunities to witness to their faith with peers, children, and adults.
- Parish staff and leadership are supportive of youth ministry and youth involvement.

Adult leaders, parish staff members, and youth, interviewed in the EPDYM study, repeatedly describe their parish as a home for youth, using images like “second home,” “part of the fabric,” and “heart of the parish.” “They describe in glowing

terms their parish’s feeling about young people and their parish’s support for youth ministry. The leaders in these parish communities have a common vision for youth ministry and work together on behalf of youth. . . These communities care deeply for the youth in their midst, and—as in all healthy relationships—this affection is mutual. Youth care about the parish and feel connected with adults in the community. One powerful image that leaders used to describe their community is a web of relationships: youth to youth, youth to adults, youth ministry leaders to parents, parents to youth, youth to the parish as a whole. Through this web, youth are served, included, and empowered.” (East, et al., 15)

Strategies

How can a congregation equip and engage young people in the life, ministries, and practices of the congregation?

1. Congregations can examine their activities—from worship to education to social events—to determine if they are welcoming and involving of young people. Consider questions such as the following in examining the role of young people in the congregation:
 - How and where are adolescents already participating in church life?
 - What can we do to better enable the participation of adolescents?
 - What can we do to prepare young people more fully for participation in the community? What can we do to prepare adults to accept young people in the life and ministries of the congregation.
 - How will adolescents’ participation contribute to the community’s life, ministries, and/or practices?
2. Create a youth program or task form to analyze youth involvement in the parish or community, using the questions above. For example: organize the young people into teams and give them 1-2 months to explore the life and ministries of the parish. Tell them to interview people, take photos or video, and create a report on youth involvement in parish life for young people, for the church staff and leadership, and for the community.
3. Congregations can raise the profile of young people in the faith community by making them more visible at parish gatherings,

recognizing their presence in the community, and affirming their contributions to the parish and the wider community. Congregations can also pray for youth events, such as service trips or retreats, and for important milestones in the lives of young people, such as graduations and other accomplishments.

4. Faith formation with adolescents can connect learning and community participation so that the content of faith formation program is aligned with congregational life, thereby preparing teens for participation in the life of the church. For example, learning programs can prepare teens with an understanding of the theology, symbols, rituals, and meaning of Holy Week, and then support their active participation in Holy Week service of the church. Young people can be involved the preparation and leadership of Holy Week services by utilizing their talents in art, drama, music, leading prayer, and so on. Other examples include study and reflection on the Sunday Scripture readings in preparation for worship and preparation for a community-wide service project. *The key is that what youth are learning in their program is aligned with hands-on participation in congregational life.*
5. Faith formation with adolescents can offer intergenerational programming to build relationships and faith sharing between young people and other generations. For example, conducting seasonal intergenerational faith formation programs to prepare the community for participation in church events, liturgical seasons, etc.; transforming a youth-only program to include other generations, such as redesigning a youth service program into an intergenerational service program; incorporating intergenerational dialogues into youth programming; and developing mentoring relationships between youth and adults for prayer, spiritual direction, service involvement, and confirmation. (For more on intergenerational learning see the article on “Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation” in this issue.)

It is important to remember that adolescents are not only shaped by practices in which they participate, they also “act back” on the community with new insights, ideas, and actions that can

contribute to the transformation of the community. In many congregations young people who participate in a summer service/immersion program share their experiences (stories, photos, video) with the whole congregation at Sunday worship or through presentations to the whole community. For many congregations this has been the catalyst for getting the whole congregation involved in the work of justice and service. In this case young people have led the congregation into a new practice and ministry.

Equipping for Leadership

A hallmark of effective congregations and youth ministry is that young people are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational and youth activities. Both the *Exemplary Youth Ministry* and the *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* studies identified this as a best practice. Through their preparation for and involvement in leadership roles, young people grow in the knowledge and practice of their faith.

Developing youth as leaders is an excellent opportunity for faith formation in which young people are equipped and apprenticed into congregational and youth ministry leadership roles in worship, music, witness, and service ministries of the congregations. Because their personal gifts and skills are matched with avenues of service and ministry, the youth respond in enthusiastic ways. They rise to the occasion. When adults expect much of the youth, and help them match gifts with opportunities for service, they experience God at work in their lives.

EPDYM found that in parishes with effective youth ministry, youth are active in and have ownership in the parish’s youth ministry. They are not just passive recipients of ministry by adults. Youth share leadership for visioning and implementing programs and strategies. They witness to their faith with their peers. The opportunities for youth leadership roles are varied: youth mentoring younger youth, peer leaders on retreats, planning programs, leading team meetings, leading or co-leading small faith sharing groups, and preparing worship.

How can a congregation equip and involve youth as leaders in congregation?

1. Identify ways to integrate youth into existing congregational leadership roles. Identify all of the possibilities for leadership in the ministries, programs, and activities of the church: councils and committees,

ministries and programs (liturgy, justice and service, social activities, education). Identify specific roles for adolescents such as teachers in children's faith formation or as readers, greeters, musicians, artists for Sunday worship.

2. Establish an apprenticeship program for youth leadership which includes formation in leadership (skills workshops, a spiritual formation retreat, regular support gatherings) and an adult mentor already involved in church leadership and ministry, who can guide and support the young person. For leadership in youth ministry the mentor can be older or an older teen.
3. Create new leadership roles for youth which draw upon some of their unique and special gifts that can benefit the entire community, such as web site design, video productions, drama productions, music (instrumental and voice), and art.
4. Offer an annual youth leadership training course, camp, or retreat to develop the leadership spirituality, skills, and practices of young people.

Best Practice 5. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the faith of parents and the whole family, and equips, resources, and supports parents in sharing faith with teens.

One of the most significant and startling findings in the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) is the impact of parental faith and religiosity on the beliefs and practices of teenagers. NSYR found: "of parents who report that their faith is *extremely* important in their daily lives, 67 percent of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens report that faith is not very or not important in their lives" (Smith, 57). The opposite is also true: parents for whom faith is somewhat or not at all important have teens who believe the same thing. Smith concludes, "In sum, therefore, we think that the best general rule of thumb is this" "***We'll get what we are***" (emphasis added). By normal processes of socialization, and unless other significant forces intervene, more than what parents might say they *want* as religious outcomes of their children,

most parents most likely will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves *are*." (Smith, 57)

The importance of parental faith and practice on the lives of children and teens is clear. Smith concludes by saying:

"Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misconceptions, we believe that *the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents* (emphasis added). Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives. ...the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents *do* look like. Parents and other adults most likely "will get what they are." This recognition may be empowering to parents, or alarming, or both. But it is a fact worth taking seriously in any case." (Smith, 261)

Smith and Denton conclude: "*The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities*" (emphasis added) (Smith, 267).

It is clear from the research that parents are the most influential factor in faith transmission, but how do parents influence their teen's religious loyalty. In her study Carol Lytch found that is very important for parents to link teens to their churches, the primary place where they develop religious commitment through socialization and religious experience.

- First, the early religious nurture of parents in linking the child to the church and teaching the child the stories, symbols, and practices of their faith is the source for many of the enduring traits of identity, religious experience, and patterns of thought and action.
- Second, the parents' role of linking the child to the church continues to be important in the teen years. Parents influence teens in what they believe and how they practice their faith by maintaining a church attendance rule even into the teen years.
- Third, one of the most important things parents do is choose a church that is

attractive to teens. If parents choose a church that attracts teens by the sense of belonging, meaning, and competencies that it offers, parents facilitate the link between the teen and the church that is crucial for developing religious loyalty. (Lyttch, 199)

The *Exemplary Youth Ministry Study* confirms the important of parents and the family. The study discovered five family assets that promote faith maturity in young people. The first three focus on life within the family, the other two describe what the congregation is doing to support parents.

1. *Strong Parental Faith:* Parent(s) possess and practice a vital and informed faith.
2. *Family Faith Practices:* Parents engage youth and family in conversations, prayer, bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life
3. *Family Harmony:* Family expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.
4. *Congregations Equip Parents:* Congregations offer instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equips parents for nurturing faith at home.
5. *Congregations Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships:* Congregations offer parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.

Strategies

How can a congregation nurture the faith of parents and the whole family?

1. Equip parents of teenagers for their parenting roles and sharing faith with teens through classes, workshops, retreats, and/or support groups. These could include such things as parenting classes, parent-youth discussion times, parent support groups, seminars for parents of younger youth as they enter adolescence, seminars for parents of older youth as they provide for college, and so forth. Give parents the opportunity to meet and socialize with other parents of teens.
2. Plan programs for parents and teens on common areas of interest and need, such as parent-teen community, making vocational decisions, cultural/media influences, social issues, and so on. Plan activities where teens and parents do something together, such as a parent-teen service program.

3. Plan specific programs (learning, service, social, worship) for the whole family and/or re-design an existing youth program to include the whole family as a regular part of the annual calendar of youth programming.
4. Provide parent information and resources for developing the faith life of teenagers. This information can take many forms: print, audio, video, and/or web-based.
5. Involve parents in leadership roles and in the planning processes for youth ministry. Seek the input of parents in the programming and scheduling of activities. Develop a youth ministry council that includes parent representatives to bring a family perspectives to programs and activities, and their scheduling.

(See also the articles on “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation” and “Best Practices in Parent Faith Formation” for more ideas and strategies.)

Best Practice 6. Effective adolescent faith formation utilizes a variety of program models to develop the faith maturity of young people.

The *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* and *Exemplary Youth Ministry* studies conclude that there is ***no one best program model for adolescent faith formation***. The most effective congregations utilize a variety of program models in their faith formation efforts. The *Exemplary Youth Ministry* found that effective youth programming is characterized by the following factors:

- *A Caring Environment:* providing multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging
- *Quality Relationships:* developing authentic relationships among youth and adults establishing an environment of presence and life engagement
- *Focus on Jesus Christ:* the life and ministry of Jesus inspires the ministry’s mission, practices, and relationships
- *Life Issues:* the full range of young people’s lives is valued and addressed
- *Well Organized:* engaging participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation, and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations

Effective congregations integrate a variety of approaches to provide young people with engaging and varied learning opportunities.

- **Retreats.** Youth retreats have a unique ability to touch the hearts of young people. Retreat experiences help build communities of faith, help youth grow closer to God, and draw them back into active involvement in parish life. Simply put, retreats have the power to change the lives of young people, calling them more deeply into discipleship. (EPDYM)
- **Service.** Participating in Christian service has a powerful impact in the faith life of teens. Christian service experiences make faith real and alive for young people. These experiences foster growth in faith and often change the lives of young people, sometimes dramatically. Some of the changes in the lives of young people include young people's perspective on the poor, awareness of the causes of social justice, empathy for others, and feeling valuable because they can make a difference. (EPDYM) The most effective service programming combines hands-on action with preparation for service through a course or workshop and the reflection upon the service experience.
- **Milestones and Life Transitions.** Confirmation, receiving a driver's license, graduation from high school moments of sickness (personal, family, friends), the death of a loved one, and life decisions are all important milestones or life transitions that provide an excellent opportunity for adolescent faith formation. Congregations would do well to carefully plan 1) the preparation for marking a milestone, 2) the experience of the celebration or remembrance of the milestone, and 3) follow-up after the milestone. A milestones plan includes congregational activities and individual/home activities. (See the article on "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation" for a description and example of milestones faith formation.)
- **Weekly Youth Meetings.** Weekly youth meetings of 1 ½-2 hours provide a setting for teaching specific faith themes and life issues in combination with other program components, such as community building and prayer.

- **Small Faith Communities or Cell Groups.** Young people are organized into small groups of ten to twelve members that meet weekly or bi-weekly with adult mentors at the church or in homes. One type of small groups focuses on discipleship or faith sharing: Bible study, faith theme or issue-oriented, or Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing. Another type of small group focuses on practices such as prayer, service/faith in action, leadership, or ministry. This small group setting is extremely good at building an environment for faith sharing and relationship building, as well as involving youth in leading discussions and activities.
- **Monthly Youth Gathering.** Many congregations organize their youth programs on a monthly basis with a integrated approach of community building, meal, prayer or liturgy, social activities, and teaching. Each monthly gathering addresses a specific faith theme as part of the overall program.
- **Courses and Workshops.** Increasingly faith formation programs with adolescents focuses on short-term learning opportunities, such as a four or six-week courses or one-day workshops that provide focused learning on a particular faith theme, life issue, book of the Bible and other content areas.
- **Intergenerational Faith Formation.** Intergenerational learning provides a format in which young people learn with all ages, as well as with their peers in a learning model that includes community-building, prayer, faith sharing, small group discussion, and experiential learning activities. Many times young people have a leadership role in intergenerational learning, such as presenting a drama or video presentation to the whole group. (For more on intergenerational faith formation see the article on "Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation.")
- **Independent Learning.** With the increasing number and variety of audio and video podcasts and online learning resources, independent learning offers a 24/7 approach to faith formation of busy teens. Examples of independent learning include: magazines (print or online), podcasts/audio learning, video podcasts and video-based learning, online bible studies, and online learning

centers, such as Disciples Now (www.disciplesnow.com) and Spirit and Song (www.spiritandsong.com).

Best Practice 7. Effective faith formation with adolescents respects the ways teenagers learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

The dramatic changes in our culture and new research into learning, such as brain-based learning, multiple intelligence, and styles of learning, are changing the way we understand how adolescents learn. Congregations are using contemporary cultural trends and research to create and teach learning experiences that engage the whole teenager. At the heart of the most effective learning is creating an environment in which relationships among the teens can flourish *and* designing programs that are experiential, relevant, and engaging.

The *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* study found that effective faith formation:

- begins with real-life issues and connects faith to life;
- is facilitated by open-minded, authentic, and faith-filled adults;
- includes community building;
- includes peer sharing, peer witness, and youth leadership;
- teaches about religious identity;
- is experiential, active, and innovative; and
- doesn't feel like school—doesn't involve long lectures or too much focus on textbooks

The most effective congregations are using research and contemporary cultural trends to design and teach learning experiences for today's adolescents that several key features.

- Incorporating learning activities that teach to the different *intelligences* of adolescents. Embracing a “multiple intelligences” approach provides different ways for teens to learn or “know” a particular concept, Bible story or belief. While not every program can incorporate activities for all eight intelligences, having a greater variety of ways to learn promotes more effective learning and engages teens more fully in the learning experience. The multiple

intelligences identified by Howard Gardner include :

- verbal-linguistic (word smart, book smart)
- logical-mathematical (number smart, logic smart)
- visual-spatial (art smart, picture smart)
- bodily-kinesthetic (body smart, movement smart)
- musical-rhythmic (music smart, sound smart)
- naturalist (nature smart, environment smart)
- interpersonal (people smart, group smart)
- intrapersonal (self smart, introspection smart)

- Respecting the variety of *learning styles* among young people by incorporating a diversity of learning activities and methods in a learning experience, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, hands-on, concrete experiences, some through reflective observation, some through an exploration and analysis of knowledge, theories, and concepts, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices. (For further information see: *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, by David Kolb. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984.)
- Incorporating *small group participation* as an essential component of all learning so that young people discuss and process together what they are learning, reflect on their faith and life experience, have the opportunity to question, and envision ways to live or practice their faith. Group participation requires creating an environment that is safe, caring, accepting, and trustworthy so that young people feel free to share, discuss, question, and apply.
- Utilizing all of the *senses* in a learning experience where adolescents can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
- Immersing adolescents in *images* and the visual nature of learning. Teenagers are growing up in an image-driven culture. They “hear with their eyes.” Images, art, and film are integral to effective learning today.

- Participating in *collaborative learning*, in non-competitive groups, where they can learn-by-doing: working together to research a faith theme or life issue, developing a creative project (video, drama, art, demonstration, web site) that integrates what they are learning, and practicing and presenting their project.
- Engaging adolescents in *practicing* and *performing* what they are learning by incorporating real-life application activities in the learning experience. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it.

Conclusion

As with all effective congregational ministries, leadership is essential in adolescent faith formation. As an integral element of congregation's overall ministry with youth, leadership for adolescent faith formation is part of the leadership structure of youth ministry. The *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* (EPDYM) and *Exemplary Youth Ministry* (EYM) studies identified the leadership roles—pastor, youth minister, youth ministry team, and adult/youth leaders—and qualities that make for an effective congregational youth ministry.

A critically important element in effective adolescent faith formation is the adult teacher or mentor. Teachers possess and practice a vital and informed faith (EYM). An adult of mature faith lies at the foundation of all good teaching of young people. Teachers are models for teens. They manifest the presence of God in their lives. Their continuing growth in faith and active discipleship offer living examples for teens. They share their own faith story as they transmit the faith story of the Christian tradition.

Teachers foster authentic relationships and effective practices with youth within a clear vision strengthened by training and support (EYM). "Adults who work with youth must be genuine and real. They must have a passion for youth and be faith-filled. They are willing to be present to youth where they are: in the context of their lives. These adult volunteers build positive relationships with young people that are based in faith." In the conclusion to *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith reminds us "Adults should be aware that better adult teaching of youth will require stronger adult relationships with youth. More important in the effective religious teaching of teens than, say, pedagogical techniques will be the building of sustained, meaningful adult relationships with the

teens they teach. This will require investments of time, attention, and readiness to be open and vulnerable with teens." (Smith, 267)

Teachers know contemporary educational theory and methods for teaching adolescents today. They function more as a facilitator of learning, shifting their role from the "teacher-as-expert" to the "teacher-as-resource-for-learning." While transmitting the faith tradition is important, teachers guide young people in developing practices for living the Christian faith, and create space for the young people to find their own voice as disciples.

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Web Sites on the Research Studies

- www.exemplarym.com – the web site for the Exemplary Youth Project contains research summaries, profiles of exemplary congregations in the study, and conference papers and presentations from the 2005 national conference.
- www.youthandreligion.org – the web site for the National Study on Youth and Religion contains news on the project, research findings, and research reports on selected topics from the study
- www.ymsp.org – the web site for the Youth and Spirituality Project contains an overview and news about the project, articles, and resources
- www.cmdnet.org – the web site for the Center for Ministry Development has additional information on the EPDYM study by going to the "Youth Ministry" section of the web site

Practice Ideas

Planning for Adolescent Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, “Best Practices in Adolescent Faith Formation,” to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with adolescents in your congregation.

Best Practice 1. Effective adolescent faith formation involves two movements in the development of religious commitment in youth: socialization and religious experience.

- How does your congregation provide for the **socialization** of young people into the Christian way of life? What are your congregation’s strengths and weaknesses in providing socialization for youth?
- What are one or two new initiatives that your church can develop to enhance or expand its socialization efforts?
- How does your congregation provide opportunities for **religious experiences** where teens can meet God face to face? What are your congregation’s strengths and weaknesses in providing religious experiences for youth?
- What are one or two new initiatives that your church can develop to enhance or expand religious experience opportunities for youth?

Best Practice 2. Effective adolescent faith formation offers teens a sense of belonging that ties them into the fellowship of their church, a sense of the comprehensive meaning of the whole of life that is based in religious truth, and opportunities to develop various competencies that assist them as they cross the threshold into adult roles and institutions.

- How does your congregation facilitate a sense of **belonging** among young people? Identify specific ways this happens in the congregation and in youth ministry.

- How can your congregation strengthen the sense of belonging young people feel?
- How does your church help teens make **meaning** out of the various segments of their life experience in the context of the Christian faith?
- How can your congregation provide new ways for young people to make meaning out of their life in light of the Christian faith?
- What opportunities does your congregation offer teens to develop **competence**? What is the content of these programs and opportunities?
- How can your congregation provide new ways for young people to develop competence?

Best Practice 3. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the spiritual life of teenagers and the adults who minister with them through spiritual disciplines and contemplative practices.

- How does your congregation currently nurture the spiritual life of young people? Identify the settings, programs, and/or activities.
- What are the ways that your church **infuses** spiritual development and a contemplative approach into youth programs and activities? What specific things do you do?
- How can strengthen or expand your efforts, as well as initiate new projects and activities? (See the article for ideas.)
- How does your congregation currently nurture the spiritual life of **adult** leaders and mentors? Is there a community of adult mentors? Identify the settings, programs, and/or activities.

- How can your congregation strengthen or expand efforts to nurture the spiritual life of adult mentors?
- What are the ways that your congregation **teaches** spiritual practices and disciplines? What specific spiritual development programs and activities do you offer? What is the content of these programs?
- How can your congregation strengthen or expand efforts, as well as initiate new programs and activities? (See the article for ideas.)

Best Practice 4. Effective adolescent faith formation equips and engages young people to participate in the life, ministries, and practices of the congregation; and to assume leadership in congregational and youth activities.

- How and where are youth currently participating in the life, ministries, and activities of the whole congregation? Identify the settings and ways they are already involved?
- How does your congregation recognize and accept youth as full members of the congregation with roles and responsibilities?
- How do educational programs and resources for teenagers provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate fully in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on?
- How well does what young people are learning in educational programs connect to hands-on participation in congregational life?
- What can your congregation do to better enable the participation of youth in congregational life? What can we do to prepare young people more fully for participation in the community? What can we do to prepare adults to accept young people in the life and ministries of the congregation?
- What are one or two new initiatives that your church can develop to more fully involve teenagers in congregational life, and prepare them for this participation?

- How and where are youth currently involved in leadership in the congregation and youth ministry?
- How are young people currently prepared for leadership?
- How can your congregation create more opportunities for youth to be involved in leadership? (See the article for ideas.)

Best Practice 5. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the faith of parents and the whole family, and equips, resources, and supports parents in sharing faith with teens.

- What are the ways that your church 1) offers opportunities for nurturing parental faith, 2) supports parents' efforts in practicing faith at home (prayer, devotions, service, caring conversations), and 3) provides them with resources to develop faith at home?
- What new initiatives can you implement that will involve the parents of teenagers? For example:
 - Equip parents of teenagers for their parenting roles and sharing faith with teens through classes, workshops, retreats, and/or support groups.
 - Plan programs for parents and teens on common areas of interest.
 - Plan programs (learning, service, social, worship) for the whole family and/or redesign an existing youth program to include the whole family.
 - Provide parent information and resources for developing the faith life of teenagers.
 - Involve parents in leadership roles and in the planning processes for youth ministry.

Best Practice 6. Effective adolescent faith formation utilizes a variety of program models to develop the faith maturity of young people.

- Which of the following program models is your congregation currently using in adolescent faith formation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your current models?
 - Retreats
 - Service programming
 - Milestones and life transitions faith formation
 - Weekly youth meetings with teaching
 - Small faith communities or cell groups
 - Monthly youth gathering with teaching
 - Courses and workshops.
 - Intergenerational faith formation
 - Independent learning
 - _____
- What are one or two new program models that your church can introduce to strengthen faith formation with adolescents and attract more teens?

Best Practice 7. Effective faith formation with adolescents respects the ways teenagers learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for adolescents to determine how well they utilize the characteristics of learning today.
 - Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of teenagers.
 - verbal-linguistic
 - logical-mathematical
 - visual-spatial
 - bodily-kinesthetic
 - musical-rhythmic
 - naturalist
 - interpersonal
 - intrapersonal
 - Respecting the variety of learning styles among young people by incorporating a diversity of learning activities and methods in a learning experience.

- Incorporating small group participation as an essential component of all learning so that young people discuss and process together what they are learning, reflect on their faith and life experience, have the opportunity to question, and envision ways to live or practice their faith.
 - Utilizing all of the senses in a learning experience where teens can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
 - Immersing teens in images and the visual nature of learning.
 - Participating in collaborative learning, where teens can learn-by-doing: working together to research a faith theme or life issue, developing a creative project that integrates what they are learning, and practicing and presenting their project
 - Engaging adolescents in practicing and performing what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience.
- How can adolescent faith formation programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to address the characteristics of effective learning today?

Action Strategies



Goldilocks in Our Midst: Ministry with Young Adolescents

Mary Lee Becker

Recently I volunteered to help set up for our church's Vacation Bible School week. When I arrived I found myself in charge of creating the "environment" for the program, which meant transforming a room with blank walls and gray carpeting into a "National Park" setting. Although I enjoy watching HGTV, an interior decorator I am not! Fortunately for me I had the assistance of four young adolescents. Armed with several boxes of artificial plants, rolls of colored plastic, a few bird houses and various miscellaneous items, we began. The greatest resource was not the objects, but the youth themselves. After a quick brainstorming session I assigned them various sections to be "in charge" of creating. Their creativity and enthusiasm was a delight to watch. In ninety minutes they transformed the room into a scene with a picnic area and pond that included lily pads, cattails and strategically placed stuffed animals nestled in the bushes. And they did it all without cell phones or computers – simply using their God-given gift of imagination!

This experience reminded me of the three keys to working with young adolescents: *understand* them, *engage* them, and *empower* them. These elements are critical to success in both what we provide (content and format) and how we interact (process and relationship) with young adolescents. All the innovate ideas, approaches and resources will be useless unless we first understand the nature and needs of this unique age.

Understanding Young Adolescents

Young adolescents (age 10-14) are a bit like Goldilocks, trying to find what's "just right" for themselves at an age when they are "too old" for this and "too young" for that. They are too old for Kool-Aid and too young for coffee, too old for daycare and too young for dating. Our

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challenge as church is to find the “just right” strategies that will assure young adolescents are connected, cared about, contributing members of our church before they enter their high school years. Church and faith need to be integral to their life before they get a driver’s license, a job and a dating life.

Ministry Inside-out

When I ask the average group of adults what first comes to mind when they hear “middle schooler” I often hear the following words: trouble, moody, loud, energetic, messy, out-of-control, disrespectful. But when I ask them to recall their own experience of being twelve or thirteen years old their descriptors are typically: awkward, confusing, wanting to fit in, lonely, unsure, frustrating. The first list typically describes what we observe from the outside, but the second list describes the thoughts and feelings found occurring within. This captures one of the dilemmas of this age: external appearance and behavior do not necessarily reflect the internal reality! To effectively minister to young adolescents we need to minister inside-out. Our starting point is to understand the nature of this age, what’s going on within them—and then help them understand and navigate the rollercoaster experience of adolescence on which they have embarked.

Years of Change in Changing Times

The early adolescent years are a unique time in a person’s lifespan. They are the bridging years between childhood and adulthood; a time of constant change and crucial identity formation. At one point we were all that age, however we were never *their* age. We all went through adolescence, but not in the world in which young adolescents live today. Today’s world is changing at an unprecedented rate, particularly in terms of information and technology. The latest digital device becomes “obsolete” nearly as quickly as a new car depreciates the moment it is driven off the

dealer’s lot. And yet in this constantly changing world one thing that remains relatively unchanged is the process of human development. Although the onset of puberty is occurring at an earlier age today and we are gaining new scientific insights into human development, the process of human development itself has remained relative the same as described by Erik Erickson in the 1950s. In other words the external environment and influences of today are significantly different compared to past generations, but the internal process of human development is the same.

The “theory of two’s and three’s” suggests humans deal with similar developmental issues at the ages of two and three, twelve and thirteen, and twenty-two and twenty-three. The primary issues involve **autonomy** and **belonging**. There is a tension between the need to be independent and self-sufficient (autonomy), while at the same time needing to matter and know someone cares (belonging). Consider a toddler who exerts her independence by releasing her grip on mom’s hand while announcing “I can do it myself” and then dashes down the grocery store aisle—only to turn around and be assured that mom is still nearby and watching him.

Fast-forward ten years and you may find a young adolescent who views “public shows of affection” from his parents as something to avoid at all costs, especially in front of his peers, yet he still relishes a loving hug goodnight in the privacy of his home. Another ten years and you may find the young adult who has moved out of the house and across town to live on his own, but frequently stops back home for use of the laundry and to take his rightful place at the family dinner table. (However, in many cases today young adults are moving back home due to more serious economic reasons.)

Balancing autonomy and belonging has particular importance and impact during the young adolescent years. These years, generally ages 10-14, are some of the most fascinating,

fun, frustrating and significant years of human development. Adolescence is a time of critical identity formation, exploring the questions of Who am I? What can I be? Where do I belong? How can I make a difference? These years can set the trajectory of life for a young person.

One word describes these years: **change**. Outside of infancy, humans grow most rapidly during the early years of adolescence. This explosion of growth involves all aspects of development: physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Therefore our approach to faith formation needs to be *holistic*, recognizing that spiritual growth happens within the context of all other aspects of development. The rate of growth varies between different aspects of development within one individual: there may be rapid physical growth and slower intellectual growth (stereotype: jock), or rapid intellectual growth and slower social development (stereotype: nerd).

Each young person develops at his or her own rate and manner resulting in a tremendous level of diversity within a group of young adolescents, more so than any other age group. There can be as much as a four year developmental difference among a group of seventh graders, at times some may function more like fifth graders and others more like ninth graders. Typically we would not plan programs that include elementary (5th grade) and high school (9th grade) participants as peers, but that is often the developmental dynamic when working with young adolescents. And the nature and rate of development is not predictable. In fact the one thing that is predictable about young adolescents is that they will change next week! Some adults find this fascinating and fun, while others find it a source of frustration.

One thing is certain, working with young adolescents will never be boring! The important thing is that adults remember that young people have no choice and no control over the process—adolescence is something

that happens to them. When adults comment that the middle school youth are so “out-of-control” I affirm them in their astute observation, and remind them that it is due to God’s design of human nature, not the conscious choice of the youth! Our role is to accept, affirm, encourage, support and guide young adolescents as they discover and develop into the persons God created them to be.

What is Important to Remember When Working with Young Adolescents

1. Lacking Judgment: Developmental “Brain Freeze”

Have you ever asked “*What were you thinking?*” only to hear the young adolescent respond “*I don’t know.*” In fact, their response may be surprisingly accurate. Or have you ever heard someone say to a young person “*If you want to be treated like an adult, then act like one.*”? This statement is not only absurd in its logic, but sadly reflective of our times. Young adolescents are not adults, nor should we expect them to act like adults. In fact, they are literally incapable of functioning as adults—yet!

Brain research has shown that the pre-frontal cortex of the brain is under major construction during adolescent years, and into young adulthood. The pre-frontal cortex (PFC) functions as the “CEO” of the brain—the center for decision making, planning, impulse control, and weighing options and consequences. Just when adolescents need it most, the PFC’s ability to act rationally and think through problems and challenges breaks down.

Even though the adolescent PFC is much closer to being mature, it is no match for the overwhelming hormone-driven impulses during these years. As David Walsh describes

it, during adolescence “the brain gets the gas before the brakes.” It is normal for adolescents to act without thinking of the consequences, to react impulsively, and to display raw emotions and mood swings. For boys impulsive behavior can be aggressive and angry. For girls it can show up as amplification of a wide range of emotions. At times this can produce adolescent “drama” deserving of an Oscar statue!

Although they clearly lack the judgment capacity needed for adult responsibilities, adolescents will often mimic what they perceive to be “adult” behavior (perhaps expecting to be treated as adults in the process). Imitation may be considered a high form of praise, but it also can reveal some painful truths and traits. In today’s technology, internet, and media driven world young adolescents are exposed to adult-like issues and situations rarely faced by previous generations. In some ways, young adolescents are the “mirrors” of our society. When we are surprised or outraged at their actions it might serve well to consider where they have seen the behavior modeled in the world around them.

During early adolescence congregations need to create a “safety net” for young adolescents and their parents as they navigate these formative years of new-found autonomy and vulnerability. We need to provide positive role models for young adolescents; adults who strive to live healthy and holy lives that reflect gospel values. Not perfect people, but authentic people of faith willing to be companions on the journey with youth. Adults who will set healthy boundaries and patiently guide young adolescents in their choices as their brains are growing toward maturity.

2. Concrete Thinkers: Cornerstone to Learning

Young adolescents are just beginning to develop abstract cognitive abilities; for the most part they are still concrete thinkers. For

something to be understandable, it needs to be tangible – which means they need to experience it through their senses. When the content of a learning experience is beyond an adolescent’s capacity to comprehend, the result is frustration for everyone involved. Sometimes when young adolescents demonstrate disruptive or distractive behavior it is simply because they do not understand the abstract concepts being presented. Given the choice of being perceived by peers as either “stupid” or “bad” many will opt for the latter to save face. When we make the message tangible and understandable we increase the odds that young adolescents will be attentive and engaged.

Taking abstract concepts of faith and values and translating them into concrete terms can be challenging, especially for adults who tend to naturally think in an abstract fashion. An effective strategy is to turn abstract concepts into concrete sentence starters. Here’s an example. When it comes to adolescents the issue of “respect” is a high concern for adults. However, respect, like all values, is an abstract concept. To simply ask young adolescents to be respectful of others will not necessarily produce the outcome you intend. Framing it as a sentence starter will help make it tangible for them: “You know you are being respectful when. . .” By completing this statement the abstract value of respect becomes a tangible list of attitudes and behaviors which young adolescents are more able to understand and practice. The same strategy can be used for all faith concepts: “You are being a forgiving person when. . .” or “You know you are being compassionate when. . .” In addition, incorporating analogies, symbols and stories into formation sessions will help young adolescents grasp concepts more readily.

3. Active Not Passive: Make it Real and Relevant

Young adolescents don't want to be spectators, they want to participate. Think of a circus. When you take children to a circus they can sit fascinated by what they are watching. However, young adolescents would much rather get a chance to actually swing on the trapeze, ride the elephant or attempt to juggle the six objects at once! I suggest a 20/80 rule when organizing programs for young adolescents: 20 percent passive listening or observing and 80 percent actively participating. Active learning not only increases understanding, but also increases retention. Effective interactive learning allows participants to explore a faith topic, discover the message and connect it to life in a hands-on manner that makes it both real and relevant to them. Active learning engages the learner through dialogue, role plays, video, demonstrations, creative expression with art and music, real-time involvement or other participatory options.

This is the age to shift from "information" to "formation." To shift from the head (cognitive) toward the heart (affective) and hands (behavioral)! Our focus should be on helping them make sense of the information they have been receiving up to this point on their faith journey. To literally "bring faith to life" and help them make the connections between what we profess as our beliefs and how we practice those beliefs in daily life. Young adolescents don't want to "hear" more about faith, they want to "do" what people of faith do and with the people who are doing it!

4. Social Beings: Spirituality of Relationship

Friends are a high priority with young adolescents; making, meeting and maintaining friends is a major focus in any setting. Their affinity for relationships shapes their spirituality as well. Providing avenues

for social interaction with peers and addressing relational issues is integral to effective faith formation. God created us as relational beings. As young adolescents become conscious of their capacity for relationships, it is an opportune time for us to encourage them in establishing and/or deepening their relationship with Jesus as their ultimate friend. This involves both a cognitive understanding and a relational experience. During adolescence, the relational aspect of spirituality is most impactful. As is often said, adolescents don't want to know about Jesus, they want to know Jesus. We can explore with them what Jesus taught about being in relationships: Gospel values of human dignity, inclusion, compassion, forgiveness and what it means to truly "love one another" as God loves us.

These years are also a prime time to emphasize what it means to belong to a faith community and explore the purpose and value of congregational life. We cannot expect them to be "the future of the church" if we don't engage them as valued young members of church today. What they experience as young adolescents shapes lifelong habits: being involved in the congregation today can become a pattern for adulthood.

Tending to the healthy social development of young adolescents takes on even greater significance in today's world of social networking and cyber bullying. Young adolescents do not understand the concept of "public and permanent" in the digital world. In many cases they are exposed to information and situations not appropriate for their age, and without the awareness or supervision of their parents. This is an issue church ought to address with both youth and parents through intergenerational efforts.

5. Gifted and Growing: Engage Their Strengths

Young adolescents bring with them many gifts that are inherent to being young adolescents—those things that come into the

room with them simply because of their age. Their natural gifts include: energy, enthusiasm, curiosity, creativity, idealism, desire to learn, humor and unedited honesty. I once heard it said that sometimes a behavioral “problem” can simply be a gift over-used or out-of-control. That can be the case with young adolescents as well. When “over used” or “out-of-control” their energy can become an undisciplined distraction, their curiosity an annoying fixation (the never-ending question of “why?”), and their creativity unwanted graffiti! But the gifts themselves are priceless and invaluable to the mission of church.

Our challenge is to channel their natural gifts into an exploration and expression of faith. We need to involve them in the mission and ministries of congregational life, for where they are so will be their gifts from God! We may believe that young adolescents need the church, but more importantly we need to acknowledge that the church needs the gifts and presence of young adolescents. Consider where your church’s ministries can use some enthusiasm, creativity and humor—then find a way to involve the young adolescents.

Young Adolescents Want & Need

1. To be respected and accepted for who they are at this stage of life.
2. To be involved and active (physically, mentally and socially).
3. To know the expectations and guidelines in a clear, concise and concrete manner.
4. To understand the “why” of matters: they are curious beings, often questioning and yet still struggling to comprehend abstract concepts.
5. To be challenged to grow and stretch their abilities, with the guidance and support of caring adults.
6. To matter to someone and know they matter; to feel connected and cared about—relationships are a priority.
7. To be acknowledged and valued for who they are as well as what they do.

8. To contribute in positive ways and given opportunities to share their gifts and make a difference for good.
9. To be affirmed and appreciated in their attempts, successes and even failures.
10. To express themselves through ideas, opinions, preferences, doubts, and dreams.

The Importance of Family Partnerships

Recent research on adolescents and religion concluded that parents are still the primary influencers in the lives of youth, and often serve as the predictors of adolescent faith practices.² During the early adolescent years, the role of parents is magnified by the sheer fact that young adolescents are highly dependent on their parents even though they are striving for independence. We no longer live in a society where young adolescents can ride their bike to a nearby park and play with friends until it’s time to eat or sleep. As a result, much of their time involves organized activities, supervised recreation and scheduled social time. Young adolescents cannot participate in all these activities without parental approval. And since they are not old enough to have a driver’s license or job, they need parents to provide transportation and necessary finances. It’s no wonder the early adolescent years can stretch and stress family life. Parents today face many challenges in their role as “provider,” often with a limited network of support.

Congregations need to partner with parents: encouraging their faith growth as adults, helping them embrace their role as primary catechists to their children, and providing resources to support them in their parenting responsibilities. One strategy is for the church to become a clearinghouse for information, resources and programs that can assist parents with young adolescents. One resource is the Search Institute whose mission is to provide breakthrough knowledge and

innovative resources to advance the health of children, youth, families, and communities.³ Search Institute has identified “assets” for youth and for families that will promote positive development and healthy living. The online resources are designed to assist both churches and families alike: search-institute.org. ParentFurther, the Search Institute website dedicated to parenting, can be found at ParentFurther.com. Another great resource, Vibrant Faith @Home, offers a variety of articles and practical strategies and tips for families: vibrantfaithathome.org.

Create Parent Connectors

Maximize the opportunities when parents are already in contact with the church.

1. Since young adolescents need parents to transport them, create a “parking lot” ministry. Example: One church distributed a “packet” to parents as they dropped their child off for a retreat: it included a prayer for support, highlights of the retreat content, and suggested “conversation starters” for at-home follow-up to the day.
2. Offer parallel programs: if youth are gathering for a program, offer a parent session at the same time. Parents can gain from the time spent at church rather than driving back and forth. The session can be educational by design, or simply a parent-to-parent networking opportunity.
3. Include a brief parent-youth segment within a program: ask parents to participate in an opening activity before leaving, or to arrive fifteen minutes before the end of a program to join in a closing prayer service with their child.
4. Integrate parent sessions within the yearly program schedule: once a quarter designate a session as a “parent session” when youth stay home and parents attend; or a youth-parent session where both participate together.
5. Provide parent materials and family at-home resources (paper and/or digital):

overview of program content, parent-teen conversation starters, at home activity suggestions, online resources, etc.

6. Create parent networks that connect families with young adolescents for faith sharing, support, and shared parenting strategies

Creating an Effective Ministry for Young Adolescents

As you assess current ministry efforts, consider revisions, and explore new opportunities, the following questions provide a helpful framework for a congregational conversation:

- *How do we view young adolescents?* How we view young adults influences how we value them: are they problems to solve or disciples to empower; are they trouble to avoid or treasures to unwrap.
- *How does our perspective regarding young adolescents align with their reality?* Just as Jesus did in his ministry, we need to meet them where they are at and address their needs and concerns before challenging them to grow in discipleship.
- *What are our hopes for them?* As Stephen Covey suggests “begin with the end in mind.” We should know what we want for them and why; and the young adolescents and their parents ought to know as well.
- *What do we expect of them?* Young adolescents are eager to meet our expectations, if they are reasonable, understandable, and attainable based on their developmental traits.
- *What can we learn from them?* The Holy Spirit speaks volumes to us through the questions, concerns, insights and unedited honesty of

young adolescents: Where do we hear their voices? How well do we listen?

- *How might they contribute to our church's mission?* Young adolescents will be drawn toward places where they can be actively involved; they want to make a difference for good, how might they do that with us.
- *What do they bring to our congregational life?* God has given young adolescents some specific charisms, if you want to renew your church simply unleash the natural gifts of young adolescents into every aspect of your congregation's life!

A Framework for Purpose-Driven Ministry

Ministry is driven by the mission of Jesus and the Church, and ministry responds to the needs of those being ministered to. The "possibilities" for ministry are endless and can be overwhelming. There is no "one right way" to develop ministry with young adolescents, but it helps to know these three things: why choices are made, the outcome intended, and how it will be achieved. Here is a "formula" to help clarify the what, why and how:

"Because. . . Our congregation needs to. . . So that. . . By. . ."

- *"Because. . ."* identifies the current needs, issues, concerns, or interests that form the real life situation of young adolescents and their families; and/or identifies the biblical or congregational mission being addressed.
- *"Our congregation needs to. . ."* describes strategies that could respond to the current reality in a manner that supports, engages, equips and/or challenges youth and families in their faith growth.

- *"So that. . ."* defines the outcome or objective that is intended—what we hope youth and/or families gain from their experience.
- *"By. . ."* identifies the specific ways the strategies might be implemented. There may be multiple ways a particular strategy is developed within the congregation both through its programs and its members.

Here's an example:

Because *families with adolescents are often stressed, stretched and scattered*
Our congregation needs to *strive to reduce stress and increase support for families; and become a companion on their journey*

So that *parents and youth experience the Christian faith as life-giving and integral to family life, not in competition with life*

By *offering intergenerational activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships; providing parents information on understanding adolescent development and resources for parenting teens; providing resources for at-home faith activities including online options; creating support networks of families with teens; offering multiple program scheduling options to meet diverse family schedules.*

Developing Viable Programs: A Formula for Success

First, we need to recognize "one-size-fits-all" is a myth! It doesn't work with clothes, airplane seats, and especially, not with young adolescents. There is no perfect program or perfect time that will attract all the young adolescents of our congregation, and yet any program at any time will attract some, if we meet three simple criteria. Here is a "formula" for determining if a program is viable:

interested youth
+
caring adult leadership
+
resources needed
equals
program

As we apply the formula we need to address three important questions:

1. *How will we know what will capture the interests and desires of the young adolescents?*
2. *Which adults are best suited to understand and enjoy working with this age?*
3. *What resources are best suited to our needs?*

Clarifying the answers to these questions will assure that programs provide a positive experience for all involved. If one element of the formula is lacking, the effectiveness of the program will be in jeopardy.

It is a simple formula, but not necessarily easy to achieve. It changes the “numbers” game and challenges us to relinquish the “bigger is better” mindset. At the same time it frees us from the “too few to make it worth it” limitation. You may find you can increase your capacity to reach more youth with several small and diverse programs rather than striving to form one large youth group to satisfy everyone. If even four young people want to study the gospel of John, and you have two adults interested in leading them, then why not offer it as one option? Or if six youth want to help serve at the next church festival, why not find a place for them to do so? In fact, Jesus taught us ministry is grounded in faith and rooted in relationships. And our experience teaches us that personal relationships develop in small settings much better than with crowds at a sports arena. Jesus spoke to the masses, but he ministered directly through personal relationship. Even amidst the crowd it was the direct personal

contact that healed the hemorrhaging woman, and the personal invitation that changed the heart of Zacchaeus.

If you are a large congregation managing hundreds of youth, the formula still holds true: to be viable there needs to be adequate adults and resources for the youth involved – or you may need to limit attendance to match the committed leadership. And remember that being a large congregation does not mean all programs have to be large. Smaller groupings and individual apprenticeships have value in any size church.

Technology and Ministry

In the 1990s “media literacy” became a topic of great interest, especially for those working with youth. The Center for Media Literacy became a leader in promoting and supporting media literacy education as a framework for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating and participating with media content.⁴ The emphasis was clear: “media” itself was value-free, not “bad” nor “good,” but rather a vehicle to convey a message. The explosive growth of technology in the last decade has increased the saturation level of media in our lives, especially for young people. I believe the same is true of technology today—in itself it is simply a “tool,” how we choose to interact with it defines its value and determines its influence on shaping our values.

Here are four strategies to consider regarding technology and ministry with adolescents:

1. *Incorporate technology within ministry:* use technology to enhance the message of your ministry. Help youth and parents use technology as a resource for growing spiritually and living as disciples
2. *Use technology as one tool* to reach and evangelize young people in innovative ways. Become digital-friendly without

excluding those who are limited in technology resources.

3. *Empower youth and parents* to become conscious of the role technology plays in their lives (“technology-literate”) and how to manage technology as a tool for living rather than be defined or controlled by it. Address issues of personal privacy and healthy boundaries of disclosure. Be aware of the generational differences in understanding of and comfort with technology.
4. *Provide opportunities to disconnect* from technology, to experience God and others in face-to-face moments. Encourage a balance between “on-line” contacts and “in-person” encounters.

Technology is a tremendous asset in communication, education and connecting people around the world. However, the call to “be still and know that I am God” can provide a healthy balance. In my retreat work I often see young adolescents react in near panic when I ask them to turn off all digital devices and cell phones for the duration of the retreat. And yet as the retreat progresses and they become engaged in the experience of reflection and personal interaction the devices become unnecessary.

A Voice, a Choice, and a Chance

In summary, young adolescent want a **voice**, a **choice**, and a **chance**. As they become more self-aware they need an outlet for self-expression, to speak their mind and know they are heard. As they grow in autonomy and discover personal preferences they want to make choices, not have them made for them. And as they discover their gifts, talents and passions they want to contribute and to know

they can make a difference. Congregations need to:

- provide ways for young adolescents to express their needs, opinions, ideas and concerns.
- provide a variety of appropriate choices and let the young adolescents and families choose what best meets their interests and availability.
- provide opportunities for young adolescents to participate and contribute to the life of the congregation, to share the gifts God has given them and be affirmed in their value to the church.

Congregations need to respond with opportunities that give young adolescents their voice, their choice and their chance.

End Notes

- ¹ *Why Do They Act That Way?—A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, David Walsh, Free Press, 2004.
- ² The National Study of Youth and Religion (youthandreligion.org), *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- ³ Search Institute, 615 First Avenue NE, Suite 125, Minneapolis, MN, 55413 (www.search-institute.org)
- ⁴ Center for Media Literacy, 22631 Pacific Coast Highway, #472, Malibu, CA 90265, (www.medialit.com).



A Voice, A Choice, A Chance

Mary Lee Becker

Young adolescents want and need. . .	Congregations need to provide. . .
A Voice	Ways for young adolescents to express their needs, opinions, ideas and concerns and know they were heard
A Choice	A variety of appropriate choices and let the young adolescents and families choose what best meets their interests, needs and availability
A Chance	Opportunities for young adolescents to actively participate and contribute to the life of the congregation, to share the gifts God has given them and be affirmed in their value to the church

Suggestions

1. **Provide ways for young adults and families to express their needs, interests, and suggestions.**
 - Create surveys (digital and/or paper) and distribute through a variety of methods. Incorporate feedback strategies: assure participants are asked to comment on their experience of the overall ministry as well as specific programs and events.
 - Create “suggestion boxes” (physical and digital) that allow young adolescents to express their ideas and opinions. Example: One church asked the young adolescents to determine which charities would benefit from a church fundraiser. A team of young people were given the selection criteria and a list of possible organizations. After a designated time for research, the youth presented their recommendation and became co-sponsors for the fundraiser.

2. **Create “apprentice” roles in which young adolescents can assist adults and grow in both their understanding and experience of being an active member in the congregation.**
 - Provide a tangible way to “identify” them in their role: designated badge with title, special T-shirt, pin, etc. Some churches ask all their organizations and ministries to consider how young adolescents might be involved in their activities, and then create a special “youth time and talent” form that outlines the specific roles designated for young people. These forms are distributed to youth as part of the church’s volunteer involvement campaign. Examples: assistant ushers, greeters, teacher assistants, servers at congregational events, game organizer for younger children at church festivals, assistants at Vacation Bible School, choir members and musicians for worship services, youth volunteers in service activities, prayer partners and “pen pals” to the home-bound, chore assistance for elderly members, and child care providers for parent programs.

3. **Acknowledge their contributions.**
 - Use the church bulletin, website, emails, pulpit announcements, etc. to acknowledge the contributions of young adolescents when appropriate.
 - Organize a special appreciation event for youth volunteers (ice cream social, pizza party, taco bar, etc.). Invite parents to join the event for a closing segment at which organizational leaders and staff acknowledge and thank the young people for their contributions. It is a great way to also affirm parents in their effort to support the spiritual development of their adolescents. (If an adult “volunteer appreciation” event is organized, include adolescent volunteers if possible.)



Engaging a New Generation

Frank Mercadante

In the 2007 motion picture *The Invasion*, Nicole Kidman plays Carol Bennell, a Washington, DC psychiatrist who observes changes in the personality of a client, her ex-husband, and finally the general population. In the course of what appears to be a routine morning, Bennell is uneasy. She says, “Something is happening. I don’t know what it is, but I can feel it.” She then turns to her companion and asks, “Have you noticed anything?”

We could ask the same question about 21st century teens! Although the teens physically resemble adolescents of the past (excluding expansive ink and multiple piercings), do they seem to think and see life differently than those of a generation ago? When it comes to church activities, does it seem like what was “tried and true” for teens is now “fried with few?”

Feeling less sure, and a bit off balance may well capture the pulse of the times for many of us. Something has distinctly changed among 21st Century teens. We can’t always name it or articulate it profoundly, but we can feel it.

The world has changed. Teens have changed. Their responses to our past programs have changed. However, many of our congregations, their faith formation approaches, and youth ministry offerings have remained the same.

Over the past several decades, two tributaries of change have formed and converged into a Niagara Falls’ force of transition. First, we are experiencing an epistemological transition. Our world is moving from a modern to a postmodern understanding of truth. Secondly, we are knee deep in generational change. We are transitioning from youth ministry and faith formation practices founded on Baby Boomers and Gen X teenage sensitivities to approaches and practices rooted in a Millennial Generation understanding of the world.

Whether we are a professional or volunteer leader, making sense of these foundational cultural changes can help clear the haze around the disconnect many of today’s young people

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are experiencing with the church. Moreover, it paves the way for an effective pastoral response to a new generation. This article attempts to overview each of these cultural transitions and their related ministerial implications.

From Modernism to Postmodernism

On March 27, 1964, the largest recorded earthquake in North American history ravaged Alaska. Lasting a full five minutes and measuring a 9.2 on a seismograph, the earthquake not only caused extensive damage, but also twisted the terrain. Neighborhoods located off the coastline before the quake boasted of ocean views afterwards. Similarly, over the past several decades, an epistemological earthquake has shaken our understanding of truth, our views, and our life perspectives. As our culture is transitioning from a modern to a postmodern world and as a result we are seeing and understanding the world very differently than before.

Postmodernism can be best described as a worldview or lens in which one understands and interacts with the world. Originating in Western Europe after World War II, postmodernism is a rejection of modernism, the dominant worldview for the past 500 years. After two world wars, the threat of nuclear destruction, the Jewish Holocaust, and industrial pollution, the means and promise of the modern age were being questioned. The world was not uniting in agreement and progressing in the most important arena of life: the service of humanity.

Postmodernism emerged from the apparent failures of modernism as a means for human progress and a moral framework for culture. Postmodern thinkers challenged the tenets of modernism by replacing reason for experience, absolutes for opinions, universal truth for diversity of truths, certainty for

humility, propositions for realities, and linear thinking for random thought.

Because postmodern truth is based in practical reality, it is also related to a preference for authenticity. Instead of focusing on what one should be, and therefore, creating distance between one another, people should deal with their honest realities and open the door to experience greater connection and intimacy. Post-moderns are not looking for something to believe in as much as a community in which to belong.

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges to reaching the younger generation resides in the fact that we are living within an epistemological parenthesis. Our culture runs on two operating systems, an older modern platform and a newer postmodern version. Generally speaking, young people tend to be the early adopters, while older folks may stay with a system that's familiar and comfortable. More specifically, although highly concentrated in present day teens, post-modernism's cultural influence spans multiple generations. With two languages to describe and understand the world, the present generational disconnect should not surprise us.

An Emerging Spirituality

As challenging as this epistemological shift is to the church, it equally brims with opportunity. The struggle to reach a changing world is a reoccurring theme throughout the church's history. In his book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch demonstrates how the theology of mission was defined and redefined with every paradigmatic shift over history.

A new spirituality is emerging as we increasingly view our world through a postmodern lens. In the book, *Finding Faith*, Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller describe this emerging spirituality among Post Boomers as "expressive communalism."

Expressive Communalism places an emphasis upon embodiment and community. People desire a deep, personal faith experience within the context of a close-knit and meaningful physical community. There is a hunger to belong, serve within the community, and serve others through social outreach outside the community. Moving away from a strictly rational faith, many Post Boomers hunger for a more holistic expression of faith that makes cognitive sense, but is more an embodied experience through worship, teaching, and concrete forms of service. Valuing organic grassroots leadership, they respond well to a participative style.

Addressing the contours of this emerging spirituality requires a retooling of our modern forms of evangelization. Perhaps, we move from modern evangelizing to postmodern *immanuelizing*.

Immanuelization

Framing a new evangelization around the concept of the “Immanuel” (“God with us”) is critical because it fundamentally roots its expression in the theology of incarnation. The incarnation is so profound and radical, it becomes the primary impulse for all God’s working in the world. As it defines Jesus’ mission, so it gives shape to the church’s continuation of that mission today.

Modernity led by abstraction. Postmodernity leads by concretizing. To incarnate, actually means to make something concrete and real. The word literally means embodied in flesh or taking on flesh. Because postmodern truth arrives through the world of experience, the church must communicate the gospel experientially. In other words, we must operate as the embodied and experiential presence of Jesus. We can’t just talk about God’s love; we’ve got to *be* God’s love.

Immanuelizing means coming to grips with the fact that *the medium is the message*. It means living up to our billing as the Body of Christ. Jesus said the world will know us

because of our compelling lives of love (John 13:35). It means as individuals, and even more so as communities, taking on the character of Christ by exemplifying the fruits of the Spirit in all our dealings with others (Galatians 5:22, 23). In other words, our presence to the world is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The Shift from Modern Forms of Evangelization to Immanuelization

Additionally, moving from modern evangelization to immanuelization entails several essential shifts. (Note: *By shift, I mean added emphasis, not substituting one for the other.*)

Modern Evangelistic Expressions	Postmodern Immanuelization Shift
Individual belief as evangelistic entry point	Community belonging as evangelistic entry point
Emphasis upon rational argument as the primary apologetic	Emphasis upon the life of the church as the primary apologetic
Emphasis upon individual questing (Good news for me)	Emphasis upon service evangelization (Good news for others)
Appeal of “having it all together”	Appeal of being together in our brokenness
The mission and agenda of evangelization	The mission of accompanying people

Entry Point Shift

In a postmodern world, there is a shift from a focus on individual belief to community belonging as the evangelistic entry point. A modern evangelistic approach primarily leads with an emphasis on the individual and personal belief. The individual made a choice of personally accepting Jesus and then moved into full membership in the community. The map to a modern expression of faith often followed the sequential route of believing, belonging, and behaving. Driven by

personally believing a certain set of religious truths, one then joined a community that shared the same individual beliefs, and then adopted the behaviors of the community.

As much as community is in the very DNA of Christianity, we had the theology but often lacked the experiential reality. Over time we adopted an understanding of community as a disembodied theological truth that mostly fell short of authentic experience. Practically speaking, many of our congregations became assemblies of individuals rather than authentic experiences of community.

Our evangelistic approach needs to shift from believing, belonging, and behaving, to belonging, behaving, and believing. If belonging is the evangelistic entry point, then evangelization must be rooted and expressed through the life of the community.

In the past, we've followed the believing, belonging, and behaving sequence: One embraces the faith in a rational and cognitive way, sacramentally joins the community, and then adapts the behavior of the faith community. Mission or service was on the tail end and a mature response to one's belief.

However, in reality, a faith journey is too rich and complex to be artificially packaged into a neat, predictable order. Young people today tend to hyperlink their way through life. Evangelization is not confined to particular evangelistic activities, but occurs in every corner of parish life as one is welcomed and participates in the overall life of the faith community. Because young people seek belonging, possess an embodied spirituality, and a propensity towards active participatory activities, concrete and communal acts of participation and service may be the most effective evangelistic activity.

An Apologetic Shift

A second shift is from rational argument as the primary apologetic to the life of the church as the principal defense of the truth of the Gospel. This is not to say that we no longer need a reasoned argument for our

faith. We do. However, even if we win the day intellectually, most people will ultimately reject our message as a result of our inability to embody or live our truth.

When it comes to discerning truth, today's young people speak a new language. The Christian Church, as "the treasury of truths" leaves many of them shrugging their shoulders. Truth has to be real or work in real life to be true because they place more confidence in what they experience than what is merely said. In other words, truths are not judged by words and what makes rational sense, but by how well those words match up with real life experiences. In order to effectively evangelize young people today, the life of our congregations must become our most convincing apologetic. The credibility of our message is directly tied to the quality of our love. Jesus was definitive about our identity and reputation in the world. He said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. *"This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34, 35 italics mine).

The early church understood that it was impossible to love and serve God without loving and serving God's creation. In the second century, the Christian apologist Aristides tried to win over the emperor Caesar Hadrian with the conduct of the Christian community. He spoke of how the Christians lived honestly and upheld the highest moral standards by comforting their oppressors and even making them their friends, doing good to their enemies, reaching out to widows, advocating for the safety of orphans, carefully burying the poor who have passed from this world, treating strangers like family, ministering to the prisoner; and fasting several days in order to get enough money to feed the hungry. If that wasn't amazing enough, he added that the Christians never announced their good deeds in public, but actually tried to conceal them, trusting their reward would come from their Messiah. He concluded by saying, "And verily, this is a new

people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.”¹

Who can deny that there was something divine about these Christians? They so embodied the life and teachings of Jesus that he was truly present through them—the Body of Christ on earth. They were immanuelizing.

Service: The New Face of Evangelization

A third shift is from emphasis on individual questing to service evangelization. Evangelical campaigns in the seventies and eighties featured slogans such as “Born Again” or “I Found It.”² The messages of retreat movements and evangelistic conferences primarily appealed to the individualism of the age. Even the U.S. Army understood this, recruiting with the motto, “Be All You Can Be.” Evangelization was primarily about “you” as an individual, and about your getting your eternity and inner self in good order.

The spirituality among young people today moves away from the individual questing that characterized many of the evangelistic approaches geared toward Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. The inner spiritual focuses hold less meaning, especially if outside the context of an authentic experience of community and concrete expressions of one’s faith. Today young people prefer to express their faith in concrete and embodied ways. Inclusivity propels the heightened concern for justice among young people today. Justice and service provide teens with opportunities to address the needs of those pushed to the margins of society or those who have no voice. As a result, service is becoming the new face of evangelization.

Teens profoundly encounter Jesus in two ways as they serve. First, through the eyes of those they serve. With intentional theological reflection before and after serving, many teens recognize Jesus in the engagement—and are powerfully transformed as result. If evangelization is about facilitating an encounter with Jesus, there is no better place

to find him then in the poor (Matthew 25:37-40).

Second, young people fall in love with Jesus through his mission. They find the Great Lover as they love alongside of him. While joining him in his mission, they discover he’s the real deal, the one Person who has truly placed everyone else before himself, and they can’t help but fall deeply in love with him.

From Eternal Kingdom to Present Kingdom

Earlier forms of evangelization catered to an individualistic spirituality. The evangelistic content was centered on the individual finding God’s plan for their life and securing their own eternal salvation. The Enlightenment placed the human mind at the center of truth and removed religion from the public square of life. In turn, religion leaned towards a rational, cognitive understanding of faith and a focus on the heavenly Kingdom. Believers worked towards their eternal destiny, understanding their faith through universal propositions, and expressing their faith through personal morality. The “spiritually together” person was so caught up in the heavenly realm that they were unaffected by and independent of their surrounding historical circumstances.

Today’s teenagers do not want to be evangelized to a set of ideas or rational truths, but to a practical reality. A faith that’s mostly about you and your eternity isn’t communal enough or concrete enough to warrant much interest. It’s not that young people are uninterested in heaven or don’t care about eternity. Rather, a life with little investment in loving and serving those around you seems pretty unworthy of heaven. The Kingdom of God is as much a present reality as an everlasting one. An evangelistic message that calls young people to sacrifice on behalf of others is an authentic message worthy of investing one’s life.

Connecting On Brokenness

Modern teens accepted a humanity characterized by independence, autonomy, and self-reliance. These highbrow notions trickled down into everyday cultural expectations. Fonzie, from the 70s television series “Happy Days,” was the poster child for the “together individual.” The Fonz was cool, confident, and independent. He had it all together and had little need for others. Any fears or insecurities he may have harbored were safely masked beneath the image of his black leather jacket and Harley. The church had spiritual Fonzies. Holiness was defined by possessing a personal spiritual togetherness that separated you from others. Being holy meant having it all together, or at least projecting it. The holy person was busy with heavenly matters and less concerned with the contingencies of everyday, earthly business.

When gathering as a community, we connected on what we should be, not on what we were. One had to possess evangelistic credibility in order to bring people into this life-changing experience. That meant projecting an image of “having it all together” in order to attract those who didn’t. Evangelization was about pretending you were complete in order to attract others to a “community” that pretended the same.

Instead of being transformed into the “together individual,” the emerging spirituality seeks to be “together with others.” Instead of connecting on being ideal believers, today’s young people connect on their common brokenness. They lean away from overconfidence and certainty, and towards humility and mystery. Any display of religious swagger or moral superiority garners negative reactions. Practices that secrete even the slightest trace of religious arrogance—even with a benevolent exterior, are dismissed as toxic. Furthermore, any evangelistic approaches joined with narrow mindedness or intolerance are quickly shown the door. Equality and allowing everyone a place at the table is one of the highest postmodern values.

Our brokenness keeps us all on a level playing field.

From Agenda Driven to People Driven

Finally, there exists a shift from a mission agenda to one accompanying people. I had a friend during my college years who was so focused on the achieving the “great commission” that he was oblivious to his own “great omission”—the care of the very people at the center of his ministry. He loved evangelization more than the people he was evangelizing and they knew it. People often felt they were a means to end, secondary to something greater, an achievement of *his* work. They felt quantified, objectified, and in the end emptied by the experience.

His approach was not uncommon. People were reduced to numbers, and programs replaced relationships. Furthermore, relationships were a means for “more important” agendas or were treated as a prerequisite for evangelization. Relationships, established as strategies of influence, left young people feeling demeaned as “projects.”

Today’s youth insist on inserting humanity back to the forefront of ministry. “Drive by” approaches have to give way to establishing genuine and trusting relationships with young people. Skeptical of ubiquitous marketing, many young people smell insincerity or ulterior motives in a stranger’s attempt to strike up a spiritual conversation. Instead of just inviting teens to our programs, we need to invite them into our lives. The immanuelizer is present and accompanies young people. The agenda is to love and walk with teens within the context of an embodied faith community. Proclamation occurs as a natural result of genuine accompaniment. A person remains loved whether they become a friend or enemy of the gospel.

2. From Generation X to the Millennial Generation

In addition to an epistemological revolution, we are transitioning generationally. The Millennial Generation teens (born from 1982 to 2002) arrived in high schools in 1995.

The fact is Millennial Generation teens are very distinct from their Boomer and Generation X predecessors. Many of our common assumptions don't work with this cohort. Furthermore, many of our established and current youth ministry practices (built on those assumptions) were developed during the late Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960) and Generation X (born 1961-1981) teen years. The result is the polite disinterest and disconnect from our present ministerial efforts.

The Millennial Generation heralds an impressive array of descriptive titles such as the "Good News Generation," the "Sunshine Generation," and the "Next Great Generation."

The "Good News" title is not without warrant. Most of the negative trends of previous teenage generations have declined with Millennials. Actually, it should come as no surprise.

The Millennials arrived during a time when America was quite positive about children. The "No Children Allowed" warnings surrendered to the minivan alerts of "Baby on Board." Many educational and social initiatives were launched in order to reverse some of the negative trends that besieged the youth of previous generations. Churches got on board by hiring youth ministers and developing youth ministries. Schools developed policies that ensured that every student had equal access to an education. The Millennials enjoyed unprecedented focus, protection, and positive opportunities.

Core Characteristics of Millennial Teens

So, what makes the Millennial Generation different? There are some core traits of Millennials that distinguish them from past youth generations. The following section will describe three characteristics and the practical implications for those ministering to youth. It must be noted, however, that these are general traits and may not be true for every Millennial teen.

1. They are Special and Hovered Over

Millennials have been conditioned to feel special. They routinely received trophies for participation. They are accustomed to being hovered over by their parents, and American society as a whole. They grew up during a period when children were the dominant political agenda and over time they absorbed that message. Not surprisingly, many Millennials have come to understand and expect that the parents' purpose in life to be centered around the child's well-being, education, and future success.³

Moreover, Millennials grew up during the advent of reality television. Celebrity became accessible to commoners through shows like *Real World*. Throw in *YouTube*, and everyone's a star!

Implications

For many Millennials, going to church and sitting passively is not enough. A part of being "special" is having a special purpose or role in the community. Millennials believe that they have an important individual and collective purpose in the world. Parishes who fall short of offering teens ample opportunities for meaningful involvement will find an increasing number of disconnected youth. They are not content to wait until adulthood to be active in their faith communities and world.

Most parishes are failing to capitalize on the Millennials' collective call to make a difference in the world. Let's face it—teens are not bursting out of our pews, complaining, "You are asking too much from me!" We are guilty more of under-challenging teens—asking so little that we've bored them out of the church. Successfully connecting with today's teen means planting seeds for big dreams. We need to challenge young people, giving them a platform and the tools to be world-changers.

Furthermore, teens are not impressed or persuaded by impersonal and routine invitation, which tends to be convention for many churches. Their parents and much of society—who've paid special attention to their needs, have conditioned them to higher expectations. When a church doesn't behave similarly (or a step above), teens may perceive it as uncaring. Our invitations must be personal and even better, given within an established relationship.

2. They Are Close To Their Parents

Millennials tend to like their parents! More than one in three teens (35%) characterize their relationship with their mothers as "extremely close." Over 41% of teens report feeling "extremely close" to their fathers (Christerson, et al., 32). Their parents are more likely to be reported as their heroes than any other person. Most identify with their parents' values. Contrast that with the teenage Boomers, when in 1974, a whopping forty percent said, "That they would be better off living without their parents" Christerson, et al., 42).

The conversations parents are having with their teenage children are not the same conversations they had with their own parents when they were teens. Today, parents and their teens more freely discuss issues and topics that almost seemed taboo when they were growing up. A 2008 Teens Research Unlimited survey reported that 75% say the "like to do things with their family" and 59%

say family dinners are "in" (USA Today, April 14, 2008).

Intergenerational and Family Ministry

Much of present day youth ministry is functioning on a Boomer and Gen X teen assumption: youth are rebelling against adult and parental authority and need a place to gather with one another in their own subculture. Segregating teens from the adult population is an unexamined, default practice for many churches. However, Millennials are not a rebellious generation who are seeking freedom from out-of-touch adults. From early childhood their lives were highly organized, supervised, and coached by adults. They have grown accustomed to their parents' involvement and adult presence in their lives. The Millennials are a generation who are more open and receptive to intergenerational and family-oriented programs. Most parishes would benefit by offering more of these kinds of activities. Additionally, we should include opportunities for young people to get involved in roles of leadership and ministry that have been primarily reserved for the adult population of our parishes. This might include roles within councils and committees, and worship, service, and educational ministries.

Ministry to Parents

Few youth research studies have had the kind of earth-shattering impact as the *National Study on Youth and Religion*. A key finding of the NSYR's is that teenage faith generally mirrors parental faith. Again, this should come as no surprise. Millennials share a strong connection with their parents.

Yet the implications are clear: The borders of youth ministry need to be expanded to include outreach to parents. It means collaborating with the pastoral staff members in order to more effectively equip parents in their role as primary religious educators of their children. It means working together to

better evangelize the entire parish community. It means not doing youth ministry in an adolescent vacuum. Instead of building disciple-making youth ministries, we need to work collaboratively to grow disciple-making churches.

3. They Are Stressed Out

Millennials are high achievers. They spend more time studying and take heavier course loads in school than previous generations.⁴ They are painfully aware that their present performance directly impacts their future opportunities. Past generations were anxious about nuclear war, violence, and AIDS. Today, the greatest source of anxiety for teens is their grades and getting into a good college.

With fierce competition for the best colleges, many teens overload on a four-course menu of academics, extracurricular activities, sports, and volunteerism. Many teens choose their multiple involvements based upon how it will look on their college resume.

The amplification of involvement and achievement has come at a cost: tension and stress. Combining the pressure to get into the best colleges with today's technological opportunities, a concerning number of teens resort to academic cheating. A 2010 survey of 40,000 senior high students, reported that 59% admitted cheating on a test at least once in the past year, while 34% did it over two times. One in three reported that they used the Internet to plagiarize an assignment.⁵

In 2010, UCLA's annual freshman survey found the self-rated emotional health among incoming college freshman to be at its lowest point since they began asking the question in 1985. Almost one in three seniors reported being frequently "overwhelmed by all I had to do." Young women reported experiencing stress in greater numbers than young men. Only 17.6% of the boys reported feeling "frequently" overwhelmed, while 38.8% of the girls felt this way.⁶

Ministry Implications

Many teens suffer with tension, pressure, and busyness as constant companions in their lives. It's critical that we don't multiply their stress by heaping on more meaningless demands, burdens, and requirements. In a similar context, Jesus said to a spiritually overburdened audience, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Maybe the best way to evangelize Millennials is by personally introducing them to a God who is bigger than their successes and failures within an authentic church community that offers refuge for their weary bodies, minds, and souls.

Additionally, a contemplative prayer tradition maybe the best remedy for a busy and stressed-out teen. Not only do overstressed and under-rested Millennials need the spiritual rooting that a deep prayer life provides, but also cultivating these practices during the teen years is one of the most significant factors in developing a strong and committed young adult faith later. Christian Smith with Patricia Snell in *Souls in Transition* write, ". . . Emerging adults who as teenagers engaged in frequent and regular personal prayer and reading of scripture prove more likely than those who did not to continue on as more highly committed believers, more capable of resisting countervailing forces and mechanisms that would reduce their religious commitments and practices" (Smith and Snell, 235).

Taking the time as a community to learn, develop, and support one another in spiritual practices such as solitude, silence, centering prayer, adoration, Sabbath-keeping, *lectio divina*, etc., may be the most important investment we make for producing present and future dividends.

The Crossroads

Youth ministry stands at a crossroads. As we stand at the intersection, may we be reminded of Jesus' words, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35) Trying to go back to an earlier era and save the Church as we know it may mean losing a generation that doesn't relate any longer to our approaches and methodologies. In many ways we are presented with an incredible opportunity to become more real, loving, tolerant, community-oriented, and service-focused. Leonard Sweet poses the rhetorical questions "Will we live the time God has given us? Or will we live a time we would prefer to have?" (Sweet, 47).

How will we respond?

End Notes

- ¹ *The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher*, cited from www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html.
- ² Many Baby Boomers were evangelized through campaigns that with slogans such as "born again" or "I found It." Even the U.S. Army utilized a similar approach with a "Be All You Can Be" recruiting slogan. Such approaches appealed to the individualism of the times.
- ³ This is more true of white Millennials than African American, Latino, Asian teens, who tend to carry on with greater reciprocity. See: Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards, and Richard Flory, *Growing Up in America: The Power of Race in the Lives of Teens* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 13.
- ⁴ Comparing 1980 to 2002 in amount of time doing homework. In 1980 29% of students did more than 5 hours of homework per

week. In 2002 that percentage jumped to 63%. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/section3/table.asp?tableID=697>.

- ⁵ Josephson Institute for Ethics. Accessed at: http://charactercounts.org/programs/report-card/2010/installmento2_report-card_honesty-integrity.html.
- ⁶ The American Freshmen: National Norms Fall 2010. Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Educational Research Institute at UCLA. "The percentage of students reporting that their emotional health was in the "highest 10%" or "above average" when compared to their peers dropped 3.4 percentage points from 2009, from 55.3% to 51.9%. Women were far less likely than men to report high levels of emotional health (45.9% versus 59.1%, a difference of 13.2 percentage points), although both dropped similar amounts from 2009." Quoted from page 6.

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Getting Practical with the New Generation

Frank Mercadante

Based upon both epistemological and generational cultural shifts, here are several practical expressions for engaging a new generation.

- 1. Concrete expressions of faith speak to young people with a postmodern perspective.** Look at service from an evangelistic lens (in addition to a catechetical and outreach ministry lens). Integrate evangelistic reflections into each service event by asking questions such as: Where did you see Jesus or sense God's presence in this experience? In what ways is Jesus speaking to you through this service experience? How will you respond? Integrate prayer responses to these reflections.
- 2. Millennials hunger for and respond to relationships.** Intentionally build a friendship culture within religious education and youth ministry gatherings. Integrate into every gathering an opportunity to meet new people and build on existing relationships. Treat relationships as a concrete expression of formation by setting standards such as making warm eye contact with the person sharing, or learning how to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn during life and faith sharing (Romans 12:15). Treat the process of forming a genuine Christian community with the same intention as faith or catechetical content.
- 3. Intentionally foster the development of a rich, intergenerational affiliative faith** by making meaningful connections with families by capitalizing on every opportunity as early as possible, such as marriage preparation or baptism. These

events in their lives represent critical access points into the faith community. We not only need to make a connection from families to pastoral leaders, but from families to families, and children to children. For instance, baptismal preparation should include intentional community building within any classes or gatherings. Keeping those connections alive by later organizing baby-sitting co-ops, small groups, annual baptismal anniversary celebrations, and activities for their children will contribute significantly towards transforming a parish from being event driven to being community driven.

- 4. Because parents are the greatest influence in children's faith lives, it's essential that we build an active ministry with, to, and for parents.** Whether an arm of the youth ministry or by way of collaborating with other parish ministries, we need to expand our borders beyond a age segmented approach. We can do this in three specific ways:
 - 1) Support parents in their role as primary evangelizers and disciple-makers of their children within the context of everyday family life. Consider hosting gatherings and supplying resources that help mentor, support, and develop skills in parents.
 - 2) Provide practical, family-friendly, take home or downloadable resources and ideas that parents can use in their homes.
 - 3) Promote parent-teen relationships by offering gatherings, programs, service opportunities, and retreats that deal with common parent-teen issues, help develop productive communication, and provide

opportunities to grow in their faith together.

5. Young people hunger for a purpose worthy of their energies and efforts.

Youth hunger to experience the adventure of Christianity. It's not enough to go through the motions of religious education or Confirmation. Teens need a compelling vision—a spiritually discerned, visual picture of what God desires for their community and world—and practical avenues to live out this mission. Establishing local outreach and/or connecting to larger missions will appeal to young people's desire to make a difference in their world. Fostering vision, and building youth-led ministries will also result in deeper investment and ownership

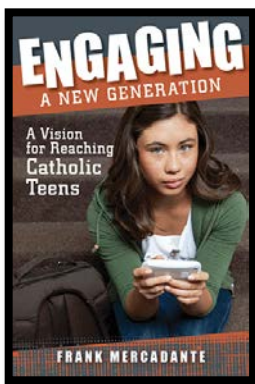
6. Today's young people understand truth as more personal and practical, than objective, and propositional.

When experience serves as the primary sifter for truth, real life becomes the lab for determining it. In other words, young people want to know if this stuff works. The onus is on us to demonstrate that it, indeed, works. Taking this position doesn't mean that we embrace the notion that "truth is simply what works." Nor does it imply that we do not recognize God's innate authority. It simply means providing teens with a good look under the hood of God's ways, helping them

recognize that love motors all of God's motives. For instance, when speaking of God's commandments, we might address young people's need for practical truth by saying, "Behind every negative commandment of God stand two positive and practical purposes: protection and provision. Every "No" is undergirded by a big, fat, emphatic "YES!" Yes, God wants what's best for us. God's commandments, like riverbanks, provide protective boundaries. When a river flows within those boundaries, communities flourish. When waters exceed their boundaries, like a flood, they wreak pain, havoc, and destruction." We might then provide practical examples of God's protection and provision undergirding the specific commandment.

7. While preparing for meetings with teens, we would do well to ask ourselves "So what?" and "Who cares?"

The very act of asking these difficult and challenging questions prepares us beyond any catechetical resource. They drill through to our own being, penetrating the depths of our hearts, striking and releasing the wellspring of our own passion for what we believe, and the stories that incarnate those beliefs. Rather than pontificating on impersonal truths, we witness to their personal reality in our lives—a perspective young people need today.



NEW

**Engaging a New Generation:
A Vision for Reaching Catholic Teens**

Frank Mercadante

(Huntington: OSV Books, 2012)

For a book excerpt go to: www.osv.com.



Special Research Report: The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry “The Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry”

In the past ten years there have been a number of excellent studies on the religious beliefs, practices, and attitudes of adolescents. Unique among these research projects is the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” (EYM), funded by the Lilly Endowment. The EYM Project focused on identifying congregations that consistently establish faith as a vital factor in the lives of their youth and discovering what accounts for their effective approaches to ministry. Seven denominations were involved in the study: Assemblies of God, Evangelical Covenant Church, , Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian Church USA, Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, and United Methodist. Dr. Roland Martinson of Luther Seminar was the project director.

Through quantitative research (surveys of youth, parents, adult youth ministry leaders, and church staff in 131 congregations selected because they nurture youth of vital faith) and qualitative research (on-site, in-depth interviews in 21 congregations) the study uncovered important findings that affirm the best in congregational youth ministry and provide direction for enhancing and expanding ministry with youth.

The survey results revealed that the 131 congregations selected for study were in fact nurturing youth of vital faith. Comparisons between these congregations and those of previous studies on 86 aspects of faith, congregational life, and youth ministry show that the congregations in the study scored significantly higher on 65 of those measures. The study identified 34 characteristics of maturing Christian youth based on prior research studies. Using these characteristics, the self-reports of young people (surveys) show significantly higher scores than those of youth participating in earlier national studies, especially in the areas of faith maturity, involvement in congregational activities, and positive rating of their congregation. Interviews with the young people, adult youth workers, youth ministers and pastors in these congregations strongly supported the picture of vital faith in the youth of these exemplary congregations. Indeed what was most impressive in the interviews was the depth and freshness with which these young people give expression to the content of their faith and the manner in which it deeply informed their lives. The data from both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the study provides overwhelming evidence that the young people in these congregations are men and women of vital faith.

This article was developed from the forthcoming book, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* by Dr. Roland Martinson (Luther Seminary) and Dr. Wesley Black (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary).
Project Website: www.exemplarym.com.

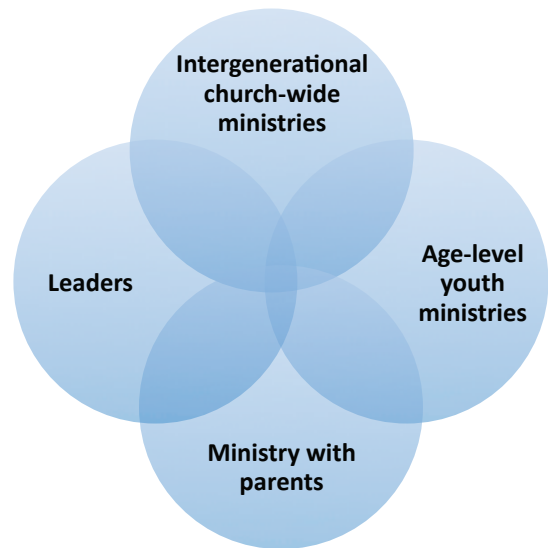
It's All About Congregational Culture

The EYM congregations present a portrait of the strong impact faith communities can have on the faith and lives of young people when churches set their minds to fully enfranchise young people in their life and ministry. When pastors, congregational leaders, parents and adult leaders work together to promote real commitment to young people as full members of the body of Christ and carry that commitment across the life and mission of the entire congregation, teenagers mature in faith and grow to respect and love their church. The EYM Study demonstrates how age-level youth ministry and ministries with family are dependent upon and greatly enhanced by congregations setting young people and youth ministry as one of its essential priorities. If a congregation is not willing to make this commitment, youth and youth ministry will always be tangential and second rate. Congregational commitment to young people is essential for an effective ministry with youth.

While confirming the power of several well known youth ministry practices, the EYM Study pointed to a congregational “culture of the Spirit”— something more basic and central in establishing vital faith in youth. The research points to the value of a congregation’s culture endowed with a palpable sense of the living, active presence of God at work among 1) the people of the whole congregation, 2) its ministries with youth, 3) its parents, 4) the ministries of the larger congregation, and 5) its congregational leaders (pastor, youth minister, adult and youth leaders) as providing the most powerful, pervasive influence these congregations have on young people long-term. It is the communal awareness of participation in God’s presence and action that permeates the values, relationships, and activities of these congregations, giving rise to an atmosphere, a “culture of the Spirit,” focused on mission and the transformation of life that seems to make them so influential in the lives and faith of young people.

At the heart of this “culture of the Spirit” is the belief that God is present, active, and alive in everything they do. These are congregations that live their belief that Jesus Christ is present and graciously at work in and through the body of Christ for the sake of the salvation of the world. Their commitment: *We, his disciples, his Church are called to pass on faith and call young people to discipleship, witness and service.* From these shared beliefs and commitments flow the practices of ministry with youth.

The congregational “culture of the Spirit” generates four spheres of relationships and practices that intersect and powerfully impact the lives of young people in the EYM congregations.



- First, these congregations’ basic ministries are thoroughly **intergenerational**. Young people are welcomed and expected to participate and lead in church-wide ministries, including worship, education, fellowship, outreach, and decision-making.
- Second, these congregations have developed **age-level ministries** marked by trusted relationships and custom-designed ministry practices and activities within a caring atmosphere of high expectation. There are multiple nurturing relationships and activities intentionally planned to create an atmosphere of respect, growth and belonging that generates an “alternative youth subculture.”
- Third, these congregations educate **parents** in the faith and equip them for family/household caring conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service.
- Fourth, these congregations are blessed with competent, faith-filled, **leadership** from the pastor to the youth minister to the adult and youth leaders who are committed to young people and developing their faith lives.

Aligning and integrating the intergenerational ministries of the congregation with adolescent age-level ministries and families/households, supported by competent, faith-filled leaders, generates intersecting arenas of influence that seem to make the work of these congregations so significant in the lives of their mature Christian youth.

Part One. Youth of Maturing Faith

Using the research findings from previous studies on the beliefs and practices of committed Christian youth (such as “Effective Christian Education Study,” Search Institute, 1986), a profile of 34 characteristics of committed, maturing Christian youth was developed for identifying congregations with high concentrations of youth with a vibrant faith.

Within the 131 congregations that were selected for the EYM study, 2252 young people completed the project survey which included questions reflecting the 34 characteristics. The survey findings from the 2252 young people provide strong and detailed evidence of their vital, maturing Christian faith. The teenagers demonstrated significantly higher scores than historical averages on scales which provide rich descriptions of the faith of these young people. For example, young people in the 131 congregations scored significantly higher (7.74 out of 9) on the “A Personal Christianity” scale which included the following items:

- *I know that Jesus Christ is the son of God who died on a cross and rose again.*
- *God is a close personal friend who guides and protects me.*
- *My life is committed to Jesus Christ.*
- *I see evidence that God is active in the world.*
- *I am keenly aware of the presence of God.*
- *God cares for me in a special way.*
- *I have a sense of being saved in Christ.*

These young people are typical teens in so many ways, facing the challenges and struggles and joys of growing up in America today. Yet in matters of faith, they possess a desire to know and follow God that defines them, shapes their character, and guides their lives.

The following ten themes (each reflecting a series of questions on the youth survey) were the most significant findings giving evidence of Christian youth of vital faith in the 131 congregations. (Each is correlated to one of the seven characteristics of maturing Christian youth.)

Characteristics of Maturing Christian Youth (9 = highest score)	Rating
1. Personal Christianity (Characteristics 1 and 2)	7.74
2. Moral Responsibility (Characteristic 6)	7.37
3. Defends and Supports Friends (Characteristic 5)	6.86
4. Faith Impact of Church Involvement (Characteristic 3)	6.83
5. Faith Maturity (All Characteristics)	6.50
6. Personal Religiousness (Characteristics 1 and 2)	6.36
7. Seeks Spiritual Growth (Characteristic 1)	5.76
8. God Consciousness (Characteristic 2)	5.38
9. Lives a Life of Service (Characteristic 5)	5.35
10. Speaks Publicly about One’s Faith (Characteristic 2)	5.31

Seven Characteristics

The findings about youth of vital faith in EYM congregations can be summarized in seven significant characteristics.



Characteristic 1. Seeking Spiritual Growth

Youth of maturing faith are curious, actively pursuing questions of faith. They want to know what it means to believe in God and what it’s like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. They frequent Bible studies and small group discussions where they can voice their doubts, find answers to their questions, and learn how to speak intelligently about what they believe. These curious young people are open to the activity of God in their lives and regularly speak about seeking God’s

guidance as well as asking friends what God has recently done in their lives. For these young people, their congregations and youth ministries provide settings where they have relationships through which they learn more about the faith and its implications for daily life. They worship, pray and study the Bible individually. These young people are integrating faith into their very self.

Characteristic 2. Possessing a Vital Faith

Youth of maturing faith are keenly aware of God: present and active in their lives, the lives of others, and the life of the world. God is experienced as an active presence, a “friend” who contributes to their lives as guide and protector. They talk about God in personal, intimate terms. They not only report that God is active in their lives, but they also see evidence of God’s activity in others and the world.

Characteristic 3. Practicing Faith in Community

Youth of maturing faith actively practice their faith in Jesus Christ through regular attendance at worship, participation in ministry, and leadership in a congregation. In addition to faith’s significant role in their day-to-day existence, these committed young people exercise their faith personally and publically through communal religious practices. They are eager to worship, pray, and participate in the community with adults throughout the ministries of the congregation. They see their church as an important part of their Christian lives, a place where God is active. Most importantly, they understand the church as more than just their youth ministry; they feel very much a part of the larger life of the congregation.

Adult Christians in these congregations, especially those involved in leadership in youth ministry have powerful influence in young peoples’ lives. Most importantly, these young peoples’ involvement in their church community is not just receiving the support of the adults; they see themselves as active participants in the ministry and vision of the congregation.

One gets a larger and perhaps even different picture of an effective ministry with youth from these young people’s comments which reflect an inclusive intergenerational understanding of the church, an understanding of the church in which ministry with young people is a congregation-

wide commitment, a ministry in which young people become “fully practicing participants.”

Characteristic 4. Making the Christian Faith a Way of Life

Youth of maturing faith recognize God’s “call” and integrate their beliefs into the conversations, decisions, and actions of daily life. In addition to believing in Jesus Christ, these young people claim that faith makes a difference in their lives and regularly speak about and act-out their faith with family and friends, and even strangers. Faith is a driving force in their lives. When speaking about reasons for what they do, they mention faith as a significant impetus for their actions. They also speak about the Christian faith as a necessary force in society that helps them and others develop defined, constructive values and attitudes. For these committed Christian adolescents, faith is not something just to know or to understand, or even to believe. Faith is something one lives; something one does; something one is.

Characteristic 5. Living a Life of Service

Youth of maturing faith are “turned outward from themselves” toward others and the world. In speech and action they serve others and take public stands on moral issues and advocate for justice. They reach out to neighbors and friends in times of crises with comfort and support. They have friends of diverse socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. They are especially concerned about the “shunned” or “difficult” or “losers.” These young people get involved in church and community. For them faith is active participation in God’s mission in the world. The importance of service in their lives is yet another example of the integrative faith of these young people. Their faith is expressed in action for the sake of others.

Characteristic 6. Exercising Moral Responsibility

Youth of maturing faith involve their faith in God in their decision-making and direction-setting. Through Bible study, conversation with Christian friends, prayer and “faith-informed reflection,” God helps them determine right or wrong as well as supports them in their decisions. These adolescents find God calling them to help others. They discourage others from being irresponsible

or dishonest. They know the moral decisions they make now will affect their future. They see hurtful actions taken not only as damaging to other people, but also as sin against God. These young people are known for their honesty, integrity, hospitality and kindness.

Characteristic 7. Possessing a Positive Spirit

Youth of maturing faith are optimistic and full of hope. They are convinced they can make the world a better place. This positive spirit is reflected in their participation in the lives of other Christian youth for whom they have high regard, care for, and frequently defend. In a world where adolescent development is consistently disconnected from spirituality, these young people are concrete examples of how spiritual development appears to have generated a hopeful, confident spirit that characterizes their sense of self and their positive stance toward one another and the world.

It is clear from the research findings that congregations *can* nurture youth of vital Christian faith. The study found congregations with high percentages of committed, maturing Christian youth. What’s going on in these congregations that is contributing to vital faith in young people? What are these congregations doing that is making a difference in the faith lives of young people? What are the qualities and practices of these congregations that can serve as a guide for all congregations? To these questions we now turn our attention.

Part Two. Faith Assets™: A Framework for Developing Youth of Vital Faith

One of the most important contributions of the Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry is the identification of 44 Faith Assets™ that contribute to the development of a vital Christian faith in young people. Developed from the survey results of the 131 “exemplary” congregations and the on-site interviews with 21 of these congregations (3 in each of the 7 denominations), the Faith Assets are elements or building blocks that constitute a framework for developing faith in young people. The study points to these 44 elements as ways and means through which

congregations have over time, with great effort and struggle, built their capacities to influence the faith and lives of young people.



The 44 Faith Assets are grouped into three categories:

■ **Congregational Assets**

1. Congregational Faith
2. Leadership of the Pastor
3. Congregational Qualities
4. Youth Involvement in the Congregation

The 22 Congregational Faith Assets describe the values and dynamics of the intergenerational life and ministry of the larger congregation. One of the major findings from the research study is the emphasis on congregational culture as essential for nurturing youth of maturing Christian faith and for sustaining an effective youth ministry. The Congregational Faith Assets reflect attributes the congregation as a whole brings to its relationships with youth. These 22 Faith Assets describe aspects of the congregation’s theological orientation, faith maturity, pastoral leadership, values, attitudes, and practices that bear directly on its capacity to engage and influence young people. Each Faith Asset identifies an element of the congregation’s overall functioning that contributes to effective ministries with youth.

■ **Youth Ministry Assets**

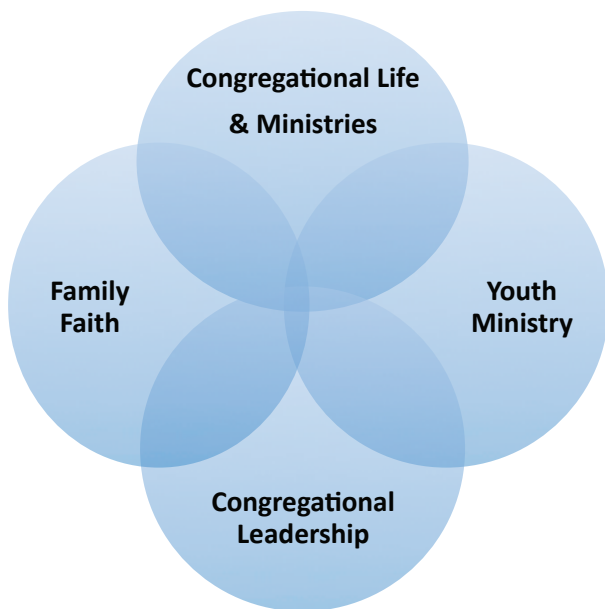
1. The Leadership of the Youth Minister
2. Adult and Youth Leaders
3. Youth Ministry Qualities

This 17 Youth Ministry Faith Assets describe the quality of the congregation’s age-level ministries with youth. Six of these Faith Assets express the strength of the primary youth minister in the congregation. Five of the Faith Assets describe the effectiveness of the peer and adult leadership in youth ministry. Six of the Faith Assets indicate the attitudes, expectations and practices of the congregation’s age-level ministries with youth. These 17 Faith Assets describe a kind of age-level “subculture” of quality ministry within the larger intergenerational culture of quality ministry with young people.

■ **Family/Household Faith Assets**

The 4 Family/Household Faith Assets describe the importance of family faith, adding another influence to the youth-friendly culture of the whole congregation and the effective age-level ministry with youth. The Family/Household Faith Assets describe the faith life and faith practices at home, and the role of the congregation in equipping and support parental and family faith.

What emerges from the 44 Faith Assets is four integrated overlapping spheres of influence: 1) congregational life and ministries, 2) age-level youth ministry, 3) family/household faith, and 4) congregational leadership (the competent and effective leadership of pastors, youth ministers, and adult and youth leaders).



It is important to remember that the 44 Faith Assets are descriptive, not prescriptive. They are not *the* definitive list. They are part of a growing body of knowledge about faith maturing in youth. They are a roadmap for developing congregations and youth ministries that promote youth of maturing faith. The 44 Faith Assets are cumulative. They build on each other. The more the better for everyone involved: the congregation, leaders, families, and young people. The key is working toward the “tipping point” when the cumulative effect of the 44 Faith Assets creates a congregational spirit and culture that maximizes efforts to nurture youth of maturing Christian faith.

An “asset-building mentality” counteracts so many stereotypes about youth ministry. For example, it confronts the “deficit mentality”—the popular misconception that we need to “solve the youth problem” or that we need to intervene to help youth through their many crises. It also counteracts the continual search for the one magic formula, activity, or program that will turn a youth ministry into superstar status. Lastly, it counteracts the myth that only large congregations with lots of resources and staff can do effective youth ministry. In an asset-building approach, *every congregation has Faith Assets*. It is only a question of how many assets. Congregations need to discover the Faith Assets that are already at work and then chart a plan for developing more assets. An asset building approach offers very tangible qualities and practices that every congregation can adopt that contribute to an effective youth ministry and nurturing youth of maturing Christian faith.

1. Congregation Faith and Qualities

What kind of congregational faith and life nurtures youth of maturing Christian faith? A surprising discovery emerges from the findings of the EYM study: entire congregations make a difference in youth ministry. The congregations in the study are powerful faith- and life-shaping systems. Youth ministry doesn’t exist on the side of or separate from the entire life and ministries of the congregation. Youth ministry is integrated into and supported by the congregation as a whole. Data from this study indicates that effective youth ministry exists as an integral dimension of a youth-friendly, youth-engaging congregation.

A> Congregational Faith

One cluster of Faith Assets focuses largely on the congregation’s theological commitments and the strategic decisions and patterns of ministry that flow from those theological commitments.

Asset 1. God’s Living Presence: The congregation possesses a sense of God’s living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service.

Asset 2. Centrality of Faith: The congregation recognizes and participates in God’s sustaining and transforming life and work.

Asset 3. Emphasizes Prayer: The congregation practices the presence of God as individuals and community through prayer and worship.

Asset 4. Focuses on Discipleship: The congregation is committed to knowing and following Jesus Christ.

Asset 5. Emphasizes Scripture: The congregation values the authority of Scripture in its life and mission.

Asset 6. Centrality of Mission: The congregation consistently witnesses, serves and promotes moral responsibility, and seeks justice.

The study’s data reflects theological commitments and ministry practices that flow from a sense of the living presence and activity of God. These commitments and practices find expression in several key themes:

- Scripture and most especially the Gospel are understood as prime “bearers” of God’s presence.
- Bible study and biblical literacy are extensive and substantive. Bible study and biblical knowledge are pursued as opportunities to “encounter God speaking to people today.”
- Congregational faith, life, and ministry are grounded in Jesus Christ—present and active within individuals and the whole community.
- Worship within the life of the community is understood as participation in the life and presence of God in the world.
- Prayer is a pervasive, core activity attached to every dimension of the congregation’s relationships, decisions, and activities.
- God’s presence is named and celebrated in the everyday life and work of youth and adults.

These themes and the Faith Assets are supported by findings from the research, as reflected in the six scales (series of questions.) in the chart. Notice the high degree of shared perceptions among youth, parents, and adult leaders in youth ministry.

Characteristics of Congregational Faith (9 = highest score)	Youth	Parents	Adult Leaders
Congregation’s Biblical Emphasis	7.16		
Congregation’s Moral Guidance	6.60	6.81	6.96
Teaches Core Christian Concepts		6.95	
Worship Services’ Positive Characteristics	6.29	6.27	6.40
Congregation Promotes Service	6.40	6.42	6.43
Congregation’s Mission Outreach	6.71		6.04

As we will see in the Youth Ministry Assets, the theological commitments of the congregation as a whole become the theological commitments of the congregation’s youth ministry. For example, because of the centrality of the Gospel and discipleship in congregational life, knowing Jesus Christ and following him in discipleship are at the core of these congregations’ youth ministries. A second example of this dynamic at work is the alignment of the mission/vision statements of the congregation and its youth ministry, reflecting striking similarities of both identity and mission. In part, the power of these congregations and their youth ministries lies in the integration of vision and mission.

B> Congregational Qualities

Ten Faith Assets reflect congregational values, expectations and practices that promote respect for youth and the inclusion of youth in congregational life. These congregational qualities describe how the life and ministry of the congregation can engage youth and make a substantive contribution to their maturing faith.

Asset 11. Supports Youth Ministry: Youth and ministry with young people are high priorities for the congregation.

Asset 12. Demonstrates Hospitality: The congregation values and welcomes all people, especially youth.,

Asset 13. Strives for Excellence: The congregation sets high standards, evaluates, and engages in continuous improvement.

Asset 14. Encourages Thinking: The congregation welcomes questions and reflection on faith and life.

Asset 15. Creates Community: Congregational life reflects high quality personal and group relationships.

Asset 16. Encourages Small Groups: The congregation engages members in study, conversation, and prayer about faith in daily life.

Asset 17. Promotes Worship: The congregation expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship.

Asset 18. Fosters Ethical Responsibility: The congregation encourages individual and social moral responsibility.

Asset 19. Promotes Service: The congregation sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally.

Asset 20. Demonstrates Effective Practices: The congregation engages in a wide variety of ministry practices and activities.

The impact of the congregations' integration of young people into the fabric of their lives and ministries is evident in the attitudes of their youth. The overall culture and climate of these congregations deeply impacts their young people as evidenced in the following scales (a set of survey questions) on the quality of congregational life. Young people's responses to questions regarding the life of their congregation demonstrate the content and force of their churches' influence in their lives. Notice how youth's perceptions are also reinforced by parents and adult leaders.

Congregational Qualities (9 = highest score)	Youth	Parents	Adult Leaders
Warm, Challenging Climate	7.05		
Welcoming Atmosphere		6.96	7.21
Satisfied with Congregation	6.93		
Importance of this Church to Me		7.73	7.96
Congregation's Moral Guidance	6.60	6.81	6.96
Congregation's Social Interaction	6.55	5.18	5.22
Congregation's Openness	6.35		
Members Experience Love and Support		6.92	

In the EYM congregations getting to know a personal and present God involves more than learning dogma or obeying a particular set of rules. These young people come to know a living and active God through relationships with God and the community. Certainly, young people learn the Gospel, the story of Christ, his teachings, and the rich and substantive Christian traditions. The young people in these congregations get to know Jesus Christ through the witness of believers and ongoing relationships with persons and communities who know Him. *The power of faithful, multi-generational Christian relationships ("sociality") is at the heart of effective youth ministry.*

C> Youth Involvement in the Congregation

Two Faith Assets describe young people as full participants in the body of Christ who are given spiritual gifts necessary for the life of the congregation. The gifts of young people are identified, developed, and utilized as youth are invited into leadership and equipped for full ministry in the church and the world. Young people are encouraged to participate in all aspects of the congregation's life and ministry.

Asset 21. Participate in the Congregation:

Youth are engaged in a wide spectrum of congregational relationships and practices.

Asset 22. Assume Ministry Leadership:

Youth are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational activities.

The findings from the survey confirm young people's positive experience of involvement in congregational life and ministries. These youth see their congregations to be effective and important to them in areas influential to their relationship with God. They are especially appreciative of their participation in congregational activities that receive significantly high scores.

Characteristics of Youth Involvement in the Congregation and Church Activities (9 = highest score)	Youth
Emphasis on Youth Participation in Congregation and Community by the Youth Ministry	7.16
Faith Impact of Church Involvement	6.83
Church Friendships	6.71
Church-Sponsored Trips	6.68
Faith-Influential Friends	6.40

Church Leadership Development Activities	5.91
Music Involvement	4.57

In contrast to many congregations who build relational youth ministries separate from the larger congregation, the youth ministries of the EYM congregations welcome young people into the center of the congregation's life together. The same relational qualities present in their youth ministries are evident in the life of these congregations as a whole.

Conclusion

Young people's responses to these closely related items of congregational life and ministry demonstrate that youth in these exemplary congregations have a keen perception of and appreciation for their churches' substantive faithfulness and effectiveness in the lives of their members, including themselves. The ministry of the entire congregation is a major factor in young people's faith development and their eagerness to be a part of the community's relationships and practices. The study presents a picture of welcoming congregations who respect and value young people and their youth ministries. These congregations involve youth and adults in genuinely integrated relationships and activities. The mission and vision of their youth ministries are aligned with the mission and vision of the church, indeed, their youth ministries often lead the way. Their worship styles reflect an awareness of the sensibilities of their youth; the worship life of the young people often inspires adults to worship in fresh ways.

The essential message from this data, points to youth ministry as a valued, critical element of these congregation's mission and vision. Youth ministry matters in these congregations and the ministries of the entire congregation contribute substantively to faithful and effective ministry with young people.

2. Youth Ministry Qualities

For the majority of the congregations in the study, their age-level youth ministries grow out of shared commitments and practices that emerge from a relational approach to making disciples with young people. These congregations minister through foundational relationships and practices uniquely and meaningfully adapted to their contexts.

The effectiveness of a congregation's youth ministry does not lie in expansive programs. When asked why their congregation is able to do a good job in nurturing youth of maturing faith, 134 pastors and youth ministers in the 131 EYM congregations indicated that "it is the vision and strong support given by our congregation" and 109 of them indicated that, "(it is) the wide variety and nature of our youth ministries."

Six Faith Assets describes the qualities of a congregation's youth ministry—the beliefs, expectations and practices that mark age-level ministry with youth. Woven through the six Faith Assets is the use of a variety of ministry practices that are "custom-designed" to address the real lives of young people in a particular congregation.

Asset 34. Establishes a Caring Environment:

Youth ministry provides multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging.

Asset 35. Develops Quality Relationship: Youth ministry develops authentic relationships among youth and adults establishing an environment of presence and life engagement.

Asset 36. Focuses on Jesus Christ: Youth ministry's mission, practices, and relationships are inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Asset 37. Considers Life Issues: Youth ministry values and addresses the full range of young people's lives.

Asset 38. Uses Many Approaches: Youth ministry intentionally and creatively employs multiple activities appropriate to the ministry's mission and context.

Asset 39. Organized and Planned: Youth ministry engages participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation, and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations.

These Faith Assets are reflected in the survey findings on Youth Ministry Qualities. Youth, parents, adults leaders, pastors and youth ministers in EYM congregations identify the most important qualities of an effective youth ministry, providing very positive ratings for congregation's efforts. Among the most important qualities that young people identify are the faith impact of youth ministry on their lives (see items 6 and 7), the relational and community qualities of

youth ministry (see items 1, 2, 3, 7), and distinct program features of a youth ministry such as well-organized, qualified adult leaders, creative and fun (see items 4 and 5). All groups affirm the importance and effectiveness of peer ministry (see item 8). Youth, parents, and adult leaders confirm the achievement of youth ministry's desired outcomes (see 9).

Youth Ministry Qualities (9 = highest score)	Y	P	AL	P & YM
1. Spiritual Support Group	8.39			
2. Emphasis on Prayer, Faith Study, Leadership, Safe and Caring Place	7.55			
3. Youth Gatherings Have a Warm, Welcoming Climate	7.44			
4. Youth Ministry's Structural Core (e.g., qualified youth workers, well run and organized, Christ-centered, safe and caring place)	7.36			
5. Youth Ministry Characteristics (Christ-centered, meaningful, creative, fun, qualified adult youth leaders, well organized)			7.25	
6. Impact on Personal Faith	7.28			
7. Emphasis on Participation in Congregation	7.16			
8. Peer Ministry	7.14	6.44	6.55	5.80
9. Achievement of Youth Ministry's Desired Outcomes (e.g., involving youth in ministry, creating community, helping youth making a commitment to Christ, connecting service involvement with Christian faith)	6.75	6.52	6.60	
10. Youth Ministry Effectiveness (e.g., achievement of desired outcomes, training adult and youth leaders, working with families)				6.08
11. Help with Life Issues	5.82			
12. Teaching Moral Values		6.60		
13. Adult-Youth Mentoring		6.56	6.31	
14. Adult-Youth Involvement Together		5.28	5.02	

[Y=youth, P=parents, AL=adult leaders, P=pastor, Y=youth minister]

Caring Environment & Quality Relationships

Youth ministries in the study work from a foundation of authentic relationships and a caring environment. EYM congregations provide youth with a variety of settings and environments where their love of Jesus Christ becomes a relational lived experience. This can be seen in young people's very positive responses to "spiritual support group" (item 1), "emphasis on safe and caring place" (item 2) and "youth gatherings have a warm, welcoming climate" (item 3). A caring environment and quality relationships undergird worship, Bible study, classes, faith and life groups, music ministries, mission trips, and a multitude of other youth ministry practices. Pastors, youth ministers, and adult leaders facilitate the development of genuine relationships among adults and youth in these faith communities. Small groups are present everywhere in these youth ministries. Small groups encourage youth to speak out on issues and address concerns in their everyday lives. Small groups focus on Scripture and the discussion of young people's questions. They regularly include meditation, prayer, silence, rituals, and spiritual reflection. .

The EYM congregations find ways to involve young people in peer relationships throughout the life and ministry of the congregation. These church friends are a positive influence on each other's faith and significant contributors to each others' vitality and resiliency. These congregations reflected the power of peer relationships in small, intimate circles of youth in which community and strong relationships thrived. These groups were described as safe and welcoming environments by the participants of the study and consistently included engaging Bible study, prayer and service.

Youth-Adult Mentoring

EYM congregations bring adults and youth together through adult-youth mentoring, which was highly rated by parents and adult leaders (items 13 and 14 above). These youth ministries recruit mature Christian adults who invest in young people. Youth in these churches report that these experiences help them grow in their faith. Adults sense the value of the mentoring and are honored to work with youth. These positive experiences with mentoring are communicated throughout the congregations which "fuels" the recruitment of new mentors. Several

congregations reported “relationship-based” ministries with adult-youth mentoring as the “center-pieces” of their work. In these ministries relationships are fostered through carefully designed practices that support adult-youth and peer-to-peer faith mentoring conversations. The development of caring adult youth leaders was essential to the substance of the youth ministries in the EYM congregations.

Prayer

Prayer, in a variety of forms and settings, is an emphasis in EYM congregations and their youth ministries (see item 2 and the Congregational Faith Assets). Prayer is integrated in all youth ministry programs and activities. Young people study about prayer and learn how to pray. Adults in the congregations prayed specifically and persistently for young people by group and by name.

Retreats

All of the 21 congregations studied through on-site visits discovered that something uniquely transformative occurs when their ministries take youth out of the ordinary rhythms and settings of their lives into focused, intense experiences of God and God’s action through retreats of spiritual exploration and mission. Retreats are transformational process in which young people encounter God first-hand. For young people these are times when information about God becomes an opportunity to meet God, to expand their understandings of God and his activity, and to know God first-hand as God changed the world through them.

Service and Outreach

Service and outreach is a distinctive strength of the EYM congregations and their youth ministries. Pastors, youth ministers, parents, adult youth workers, and youth are seriously emphasizing, equipping for, and engaging in service and outreach. They see their congregations as valuing “Mission Outreach,” “Social Responsibility,” and “Service Activities.” They see their congregations preparing young people and adults for mission. Second, young people are becoming and doing what the congregations are equipping them to do. They are

involved in service and active in public witness and ministry.

Service and Outreach Characteristics (9 = highest score)	Youth	Parents	Adult Leaders	Pastors & Youth Minister
Lives a Life of Service	5.35			
Mission Effectiveness of the Congregation	6.71			
Congregation Promotes Service Activities	6.40	6.42	6.43	
Youth’s Service Involvement		7.30	7.62	7.71
Youth’s Outreach		6.50	6.50	6.78
Social Responsibility		6.16	6.56	
Congregation’s Mission Outreach		5.82	6.04	

Custom-Designed Youth Ministry Practices, Programs, and Activities

Youth ministry in EYM congregations might well be characterized as “ordinary practices done extraordinarily well” in response to the needs of youth in their communities. These custom-designed youth ministry practices can be seen in the wide variety of activities in these youth ministries sponsor. The following practices, programs, and activities are a part of the youth ministry offerings in most of the EYM congregations: 1) community life and relationships, 2) Bible study, 3) religious education, 4) retreats, 5) mission trips and service projects, 6) social events, 7) sports, 8) family and intergenerational activities, 9) youth-oriented worship, 10) adult and youth leadership training, and 11) special events such as youth conventions.

Innovative and unique approaches to custom-designed youth ministries flow from the congregations’ pastoral and youth ministry leadership teams. Over 85% of the youth ministers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Doing things in new and creative ways is appreciated by my senior/lead pastor or supervisor.” Nearly 70% of the ministers described their congregations as being “willing to change the way things are done to increase involvement in the church.” Over half of the ministers (58.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed that their congregation is innovative. These creative and

innovative EYM youth ministries take place in the context of respect and openness in congregations that are willing to take risks and accept change.

Jesus Christ and Discipleship

One could sum up the purpose of the EYM congregations' youth ministries in a single goal: *making disciples of Jesus Christ*. These congregations focus their youth ministries on Jesus Christ and engage young people in discipleship, witness, and service that transforms their lives. Several "marks and means" of discipleship emerge in the study. These elements describe the core attributes of the congregations, their youth ministries, and their young people.

- **Disciples Know Jesus Christ:** Discipleship is grounded in the teachings, life, death, resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ alive and present. Disciples are in relationship with Christ, learn about Christ and follow Christ's leading. In the vast majority of congregations in the study, youth ministry is consciously designed to cultivate a relationship with Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, community-building, study, retreats, and service.
- **Disciples Know the Bible:** Discipleship is anchored in Bible study. It is in the Bible that youth learn the story, the truth, that shapes the life of faith. Bible studies take many shapes and forms. Most popular are small group conversational explorations of the Scripture texts in which youth and their leaders "hear" God speaking truth to their lives. Bible studies are a constitutive exercise in discipleship.
- **Disciples Know the Christian Faith:** Discipleship is learning the Christian faith. The Christian faith has a history, traditions, beliefs and values that are critical to its shaping and transforming power. Congregations are committed to teaching young people the content of the Christian faith through a variety of ministry experiences. Adult leaders guide young people in exploring the long and rich life of the people of God, creating more sturdy beliefs, engaging the tough questions, and assisting youth in finding their own "faith voice."

- **Disciples Make Faith a Way of Life:** Discipleship is the "knowledge of faith" becoming a way of life. Discipleship is regularly described as much in languages of the "heart" and the "hands" as of the "head." For the congregations in the study, it was not enough for young people to know the content of Scripture or to understand the richness of Christian beliefs. Whether small or large these churches developed expansive ministries with youth for the purpose of participating in faith as a way of life. The adults and youth in these ministries seemed to be "living into" faith that is simultaneously centered in God yet genuinely their own. They spoke about what they believed with conviction and in fresh language. Compassion, honesty, respect, integrity, service to others and justice were evident in their speech, life styles and relationships with others. All this was carried on with an eye on both tradition and experience; text and context; faith and life.
- **Disciples are Mentored:** Discipleship is formed in relationships with mentoring individuals and communities. Even though discipleship is primarily a faith-relationship in which Christ is at the center, adolescent disciples are formed in relationship with other Christians. Whole congregations become intergenerational crucibles in which conversation, relationships and practices wrap youth in a culture of "knowing and doing God." Within these congregations, people walk intentionally and directly along side young people providing diverse, concrete "snapshots" of following Jesus Christ as these mentors encourage and teach through their presence, speech and action.
- **Disciples are Equipped:** A young person's strengths and gifts of the Spirit are integral to discipleship. To follow Christ involves a call to witness and to serve others. To make disciples is to identify a teenager's spiritual gifts and equip that teenager for service in the church and the world. Congregations combine study, fellowship, personal strengths and spiritual gifts discovery with service to equip young disciples to follow Jesus Christ in the church and into the world.

An Emerging Pattern of Youth Ministry

Based on the analysis of the results from the visits and interviews of the 21 EYM congregations, a “pattern” to their youth ministries began to emerge.

- Focus on ministry with youth “outside as well as within” the faith community.
- Make contact with those who do not belong to a congregation or who don’t know Christ or who are different or in need.
- Speak with outsiders about faith and Jesus Christ and/or serve them at their point of need.
- Invite those outside the congregation to experience Jesus Christ through participation in his “body,” the community of faith.
- When new people come, welcome them into the faith community and encourage them to stay and become participants in it’s life.
- Through worship, prayer, Bible study, discipleship groups, and ongoing faith relationships (e.g., mentoring) nurture young people’s life and faith.
- Identify young people’s strengths and gifts and invite them into leadership utilizing their “giftedness” to build up the body of Christ.
- Equip young people both for leadership within the congregation and for following Christ in the world.
- Send young people out into the world to serve others and bear witness to Jesus Christ.

While not every congregation articulated all of these elements, and each congregation worked at the elements of the pattern differently, one could see a flow of “welcoming, instructing, equipping and sending” at work in the congregation’s mission statements and strategies of ministry. What’s more, “sending into the world” seemed to be integral to the congregation’s understanding of a young person’s relationship with God. For these ministries with youth, the life of faith includes, in its dynamics and its maturity, following Christ into witness and service in the world. Doing Christ’s mission in the world, these young Christians meet God in new ways, are drawn outside their egocentricity, and come to understand more fully the creative, restorative and transformative work of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

3. Family and Household Faith

Five Faith Assets describe the role of family/household faith, adding another influence to the youth-friendly culture of the whole congregation and the effective age-level ministry with youth. The family/household Faith Assets describe faith practices at home and the role of the congregation in equipping and support parental and family faith.

Asset 40. Possess Strong Parental Faith:

Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith. A vital and informed parental faith includes understanding the Christian faith, participating in worship, praying, and engaging in service and mission. Young people are in households and relationships with parents where mature faith is cultivated and modeled.

Asset 41. Promotes Family Faith Practices:

Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life. Parents not only know and live Christianity themselves, they draw their teenagers into faith practices. Parents pray with their adolescents at table, at family celebrations, during times of crises and over individual and family decisions. Service is a way of life. Together parents and young people “turn their faces outward” and live life for others.

Asset 42. Reflects Family Harmony: Family members’ expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.

Families and households find ways to navigate the challenges and stresses of daily life with approaches marked by respect, equal regard, open communication, and cooperation. Parents, grandparents and others practice individual accountability, forgiveness and reconciliation modeling faith in action and generating an atmosphere where faith can be referenced and discussed.

Asset 43. Equips Parents: The congregation offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equip parents for nurturing faith at home. Congregations provide strong adult faith formation,

emphasizing adult discipleship and offering strong preaching, Bible studies, small groups and many forms of adult Christian education. Programs develop parental faith and prepare parents for nurturing the faith of their children and adolescents.

Asset 44. Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships: The congregation offers parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships. Parent-youth programs focus on adolescent-specific issues such as family communication, adolescent independence, decision-making, choosing friends, sexual expression, and conflict resolution; as well as faith themes such as studying the Bible together, discussing case studies from youth culture, and exploring popular media. Parent-youth programs enhance the capacity of parents and teenagers to communicate and work together on matters of faith and life.

Faith Influence of Parents and Families

Echoing other major studies of adolescent faith formation conducted in the last two decades, the EYM study affirms the contribution that parents and other family members make to the faith maturity of youth. Young people reference their parents' faith as models of the Christian life. Teenagers talk about their parents and friends of their parents reaching out to care for them. Young people know about their parents' vital faith not only from observing them at church, but also from conversations about faith and daily life at meals, in the car or on intergenerational, family mission trips—practices encouraged by the church's ministry with families. These parents read the Bible and pray with their teenagers. They include their young people in faith-informed discussions of family decision and budgets. These discussions have been encouraged by parent-youth case study conversations during youth ministry activities.

Influence of Family as Rated by Youth (9 = highest score)	
Family Harmony (Lack of Family Disharmony)	7.19
Parents Are Affectionate	6.83
Lack of Parental Verbal Abuse	6.41
Mother Helps with Problems	6.29
Mother Influences My Faith	6.15
Father Helps with Problems	5.60
Family Influences My Faith	5.41

Parent and Family Faith Qualities (9 = highest score)	
God Consciousness	8.23
Moral Responsibility	7.97
Family Disharmony	7.03
Family Orientation	7.02
Use of Faith Support Group	6.70
Centrality of Faith	6.99
Social Responsibility	6.16
Desire for Participating in Leadership, Community, and Spirituality	6.49

One of the study's scales, "Family Influences My Faith," includes the question: "How often does your family (the people you live with) sit down together and talk about God, the Bible, or other religious things?" One in four young people said their family does this on a weekly or daily basis, and 40% once or twice a month. The percentages of how often the families sit down together to talk about God or matters of faith are significantly higher than those in previous studies. Young people in exemplary congregations explore understandings of God and matters of faith in their families. Faith instruction does not only occur in the congregation and youth ministry. Families reinforce what's learned at church through intentional faith practices and conversations at home.

The family's capacity to influence adolescent faith can also be seen in the spiritual guidance and modeling of fathers, mothers, and extended family members. Both mothers and fathers were identified as positive influences on young peoples' faith, with fathers especially, scoring significantly higher than in previous studies.

Equipping Parents to Pass on Faith

During the last twenty years youth ministry has reclaimed the role of family in faith formation. This renewed involvement of families in ministry with young people is evident in the values and practices of the congregations of the study. Congregations in the study have invited parents into partnership with the church in nurturing the faith of their sons and daughters. Parents exercise their partnership by participating in assessment and planning. They become the eyes and ears for the youth minister as they listen to what other parents are saying and experiencing. These parents provide realistic perspectives on what is going well in the congregation's ministry with youth as well as identify

challenges that need attention in their own families and the families of the community.

Ministry with families strengthens parenting skills especially around the developmental needs of teenagers. Parent sessions address topics of interest to parents of youth by serving as a safe place where concerned parents can work with their issues and questions. Youth ministers meet with groups of parents to evaluate past events and get their input on ministry direction and upcoming events. Congregations in the study create networks of ministry in which parents, youth, and extended families are instructed and healed. These networks of support for families provide a framework in which parents deepen their faith, grow in their ability to raise teenagers and expand their capacities to nurture faith in their young people.

Here are the ratings of the effectiveness of the EYM youth ministries in working with parents.

Youth Ministry & Parents Characteristics (9 = highest score)	Adult Leaders	Pastor & Youth Minister
Adult Workers' Relationship with Parents	6.93	
Helps Parents with Parenting Issues	5.23	
Effectiveness of Parental Education	3.97	
Strengthening Parent-Youth Relationships		4.41
Support of Families in Conflict Situations		4.16
Equipping Parents		4.70

Youth ministers in the study noted the contribution their ministries make to strengthening families and parents. One scale, "Strengthening Parent-Youth Relationships," reflects scores significantly higher than those in a recent national study of full time youth ministers. Ministers were asked, "How well is each of these aspects of your congregation's youth ministry being achieved or realized?" Their responses included:

- Helping parents become more involved in the lives of their youth
- Providing opportunities for teens and parents to interact
- Helping parents recognize and adopt wise methods of discipline
- Strengthening family relationships
- Providing help for teaching Christian concepts of right and wrong

The significantly higher scores on these items might well be related to the close family relationships that exist in most of the congregations studied. These high scores could also be a reason these families have more positive influence on the faith of their teenagers than parents in previous studies.

Strengthening a family's capacity to nurture life and pass on faith to their young people is evident in the study. One scale, "Equipping Parents," contained the key elements on which congregations in the study scored higher than those in historical studies:

- Providing education and resources parents needed to teach their youth Christian concepts of right and wrong
- Encouraging parent-youth communication through classes on how to discuss adolescent issues with youth
- Helping parents share their faith with their youth at home by such things as rituals, faith conversations, etc.
- Encouraging families to teach service as a way of life through their involvement in helping activities
- Showing parents how to foster the development of moral values in their children
- Establishing a network of care and support for youth and their families

Cross referencing these scales with others reflecting the faith commitments of youth, indicate that close parent-youth bonds, help and support given to families in conflict, and efforts made toward equipping parents of teenagers for navigating adolescence are positively related to vital faith in young people.

Supporting and strengthening families is a ministry of the whole congregation. Families are nurtured through the ministries and the quality relationships in the congregation. This can be seen in the high scores give congregational life in the survey.

Congregational Life Characteristics (9 = highest score)	Parents Rating
Importance of this Church to Me	7.73
Welcoming Atmosphere	6.96
Congregation's Moral Guidance	6.81
Congregation Promotes Service	6.42
Teaches Core Christian Concepts	6.95
Members Experience Love and Support	6.92
Congregation Makes Me Think	6.36
Satisfaction with Worship	6.27
Congregation Open to Change	6.25

Adult Education Effectiveness	5.96
Congregation's Social Interaction	5.18

Parental Involvement in Youth Ministry

The results of the study clearly indicate that parents are supportive of their congregation's effective youth ministries. One of the reasons for this support: they view the congregation's ministry to be a positive force in the lives of their sons and daughters. One church reported that families join the parish because the youth ministry provides a hospitable, substantive environment that is a safe place for their teenagers. These parents appreciate the knowledge of the faith, the values, and the leadership skills they see developed in the youth of the congregation and encourage their sons and daughters to participate.

The partnerships between the congregation and the families of their youth create a working synergy that enables the congregation, its youth ministry, and the families to contribute more to the lives and faith of their young people. In many congregations parents were directly involved in the congregation's youth ministry relationships and activities, serving as leaders/facilitators for Bible study groups, mission trips, retreats, worship, and small groups. Congregations also involve parents in planning processes to shape the direction of youth ministry. Given parents profound influence in the lives of their teens, their involvement in youth ministry is a potential source of growth in faith and life for both teenagers and their parents.

Quality relationships at church had a positive impact on young people's families. Two scales of the survey indicate that building strong relationships at church improved the atmosphere in families. The study revealed that family relationships are strengthened when families were equipped at church: 1) to engage in service activities with their teenage sons and daughters, and 2) when they were equipped for teaching Christian concepts of right and wrong to their adolescents. Parents indicated that they often struggle with the challenges of discussing their values with their children, and are left feeling alone and isolated because of the cultural forces impacting their sons and daughters. Thus they deeply value the support these congregations provided in assisting in passing their values on to their children.

4. Leadership in the Congregation

Leadership of the Pastor

Pastors matter immensely in effective youth ministry! And they matter in very specific ways. Pastors lead through their spiritual influence, their pastoral effectiveness, their love for and support of young people, and their support of youth ministry leaders. In the EYM congregations, pastors are the most influential persons among the many adults and youth sharing leadership in these effective ministries with youth.

Four Faith Assets describe the traits and leadership of the pastor regarding youth and youth ministry within the congregation. Taken together these four Faith Assets describe how influential a pastor's role is in the overall faithfulness and effectiveness of a congregation's ministries with youth.

Asset 7. Spiritual Influence: The pastor knows and models the transforming presence of God in life and ministry.

Asset 8. Interpersonal Competence: The pastor builds a sense of community and relates well with adults and youth.

Asset 9. Supports Youth Ministry: The pastor understands, guides, and advocates for youth ministry.

Asset 10. Supports Leaders: The pastor affirms and mentors youth and adults leading youth ministry.

The Pastor's Spiritual Influence

The pastors witness to their own faith in speech and action does not go unnoticed in their churches. Youth ministers, adult youth workers, parents, and young people identify four ingredients of spiritual influence: 1) their pastor's expression of what they personally believe, 2) their pastor's faith practices, 3) the way their pastor's public ministry was an expression of an authentic faith, and 4) the way their pastor's faith was integrated in their pastor's lifestyle. Furthermore, the pastor's personal faith and its undergirding theology seemed to be one of the critical elements in the faith maturity of the congregation.

Pastors influence young people, and the congregation, in the ways they talk about God, pray, and ask for forgiveness when they hurt someone. Young people report that their pastors have a direct

and profound impact on them spiritually and relationally. They say that the “Pastor’s Personal Characteristics” model Christian life in a manner that gives faith integrity and inspires them to be faithful.

Five scales focusing on the pastor’s spiritual influence received high scores from youth, parents, and adult youth workers:

Pastor’s Spiritual Influence Characteristics (9 = highest score)	Y	P	AL	P & YM
Pastor’s Spiritual Influence (pastor’s faith, pastoral skills, passion for ministry)	7.37			
Pastor’s Personal Characteristics (pastor’s personal relational and ministerial skills)	7.13			
Pastor is a Good Counselor		6.82	7.02	
Pastor Preaches to Make Disciples		6.71	6.80	
Pastor’s Mission Is to Make Disciples				6.94

[Y=youth, P=parents, AL=adult leaders, P=pastor, Y=youth minister]

The Pastor’s Effectiveness

The pastor’s effectiveness as a leader has a significant influence on the congregation and youth ministry. Four scales that describe the pastor’s leadership role receive high scores from youth, parents, and adult youth workers:

Pastor Effectiveness Characteristic (9 = highest score)	Youth	Parents	Adult Leaders
Pastor’s Personal Characteristics (pastor’s personal relational and ministerial skills)	7.13		
Effectiveness of Pastor’s Leadership		7.88	7.90
Interpersonal Characteristics		7.80	
Pastor’s Communication Skills		7.30	7.48

The Pastor’s Relational Skills

Pastors build relationships with youth, and they encourage and equip their congregations to do the same. They have a genuine interest in people, especially young people, and possess the capacity to make “heart to heart” connections with people of all ages. The relational ability of the pastor has a direct relationship to the capacity of the congregation to nurture mature levels of faith in youth and adults.

Pastors have great influence in generating a culture in which effective ministry with youth can occur through their authenticity, directness, and compassion in relationships. This in turn cultivates authenticity, directness and compassion throughout the congregation, especially in the congregation’s relationships with young people.

Pastor’s Relational Skills Characteristics (9 = highest score)	Youth	Parents	Adult Leaders
Pastor’s Personal Characteristics (pastor’s personal relational and ministerial skills)	7.13		
Interpersonal Characteristics		7.80	
Pastor’s Communication Skills		7.30	7.48

The Pastor’s Support

Pastors have strong working relationships with their youth ministry leadership team. Pastors support the congregation’s youth minister, value the work of adult youth workers, and are involved in the strategic planning of ministries with youth. Pastors also have high levels of support for and commitment to Christian education and youth ministry. Three scales describe the pastor’s support:

Pastor Support Characteristics (9 = highest score)	Adult Leaders	Pastor & Youth Minister
Pastor Supports Christian Education and Youth Ministry	8.05	
Pastor Support for Youth Staff		7.76
Pastor Creates a Healthy Climate		7.39

When you combine these four sets of strengths—spiritual influence, leadership, relationships, and support—a composite of powerful influence emerges. The effectiveness of the leadership of the pastor and the attitudes of the pastor regarding young people combine with the pastor’s relational wisdom and skill to position pastors among the most influential factors in a congregation’s youth ministries.

Leadership of the Youth Minister

Six Faith Assets describe the strengths of the primary youth minister in the congregation. The youth minister is both a competent leader with theological and ministry knowledge and skill, and a faith-filled role model for youth and adults.

Asset 23. Provides Competent Leadership: The youth minister demonstrates superior theological, theoretical, and practical knowledge and skill in leadership.

Asset 24. Models Faith: The youth minister is a role model reflecting a living faith for youth and adults.

Asset 25. Mentors Faith Life: The youth minister assists adult leaders and youth in their faith life both one-on-one and in groups.

Asset 26. Develops Teams: The youth minister reflects a clear vision and attracts gifted youth and adults into leadership.

Asset 27. Knows Youth: The youth minister knows youth and the changes in youth culture, and utilizes these understandings in ministry.

Asset 28. Establishes Effective Relationships: The youth minister enjoys effective relationships with youth, parents, volunteers, and staff.

These Faith Assets are reflected in five significant scales from the survey findings.

Youth Minister Leadership Characteristics (9 = highest score)	Youth	Parents	Adult Leaders
Youth Minister's Positive Characteristics	7.87		
Youth Minister's Leadership		8.14	
Youth Minister's Competence		8.14	7.95
Youth Minister's Effectiveness			7.83
Youth Minister Characteristics			7.24

These scales describe the qualities of the youth minister who possesses: 1) a vitality of faith; 2) a commitment to youth; 3) the capacity to relate well with youth and adults; 4) knowledge of Scripture and the Christian faith; 5) the ability to discover other's gifts and strengths; 6) effectiveness in recruiting, training and supporting adult and youth leadership; 7) the ability to assist a congregation in supporting youth ministry; 8) the capacity to handle conflict; and 9) a commitment to caring for his or her own spiritual, social and physical health.

One of the key elements for effective youth ministry is the relational ability of the youth minister: establishing close relationships with young people, and modeling and fostering significant relationships among young people and adults in the congregation. There are plentiful, positive interaction between adults and youth. As a result youth feel adults in the

church understand them. Youth ministers build bridges between the congregation and their young people. Like a bridge that has anchors in two land masses, the youth minister has influence in both the adult and youth worlds. Adults may not grasp their crucial role in influencing youth without someone guiding them in the process. By teaching and modeling for the congregation the importance of building closer bonds with young people, youth ministers can not only set the pace for volunteers and lay a solid foundation for team work with other staff, they can also foster a congregational community that nurtures teenage faith maturity.

One unique feature of the youth ministers in the study is that they all had served in the same congregation for many years, developing connections and networks of influence and leadership. It appears from the research that four factors contribute to the effectiveness and the long terms of youth ministers:

1. A congregation with high expectations "calls" a person of strong faith and passion for ministry with youth.
2. Once that person has been called, the congregation supports them with prayer, resources, ongoing education, and networks of support.
3. The person who has been called thrives in this culture of high expectations, ample resources, ongoing learning and strong support. The youth minister deepens his or her commitment, expands personal investment, and fires the imagination. Full of spirit and hope, the youth minister stays for years even decades.
4. The youth minister's faithfulness and effectiveness inspires the congregation to higher expectations, imagination and support. And forward it goes over long periods of expanding impact in the lives of young people.

Youth and Adult Leadership

A cluster of five Faith Assets describe youth and adult leadership—people of a vibrant and informed Christian faith who are "called" to youth ministry leadership. They are in significant relationships with each other and with the young people of the congregation. They prepare for their ministry through training and apprenticeships in their leadership roles.

Asset 29. Equipped for Peer Ministry: Youth practice friendship, care-giving, and outreach and are supported by ministry training and caring adults.

Asset 30. Establish Adult-Youth Mentoring: Adults engage youth in the Christian faith and life supported by informed leadership.

Asset 31. Participate in Training: Youth and adults are equipped for ministry in an atmosphere of high expectations.

Asset 32. Possesses Vibrant Faith: Youth and adult leaders possess and practice a vital and informed Christian faith.

Asset 33. Provides Competent Adult Leaders: Adults foster authentic relationships and utilize effective practices in youth ministry with a clear vision strengthened by training and support.

Adult Leadership

The adult leaders in youth ministry are women and men of mature faith. They are aware of the presence and activity of a living God in their lives and practicing faith in their daily lives. Adult leaders have a real sense that God is guiding them in daily life. Their thinking is informed by substantive understandings of God as reflected in Scripture and their faith traditions. Moreover, this awareness and understanding of God has a central place in their life's direction, their speaking, and their decision-making, leading them to be more morally responsible and socially conscious. Their faith forms the substance and sets the tone of youth ministry practices. They live their faith both at church and in the community, carrying in their lives manifold indications that God is present in their lives and influential in their decisions.

The faith of adult leaders in youth ministry is reflected in six significant scales from the survey findings:

Faith Characteristics of Adult Leaders (9 = highest score)	Adult Leader Rating
God Consciousness	8.57
Moral Responsibility	8.06
Centrality of Faith	7.47
Theological Competence	6.70
Social Responsibility	6.56
Bible Reading	5.58

Adult leaders form trusted relationships with young people and their parents as evidenced in the high scores from the survey findings:

Relational Characteristics of Adult Leaders (9 = highest score)	Adult Leader Rating
Positive Relationship with Youth	7.07
Youth Workers' Relationship with Parents	6.93

A systematic plan for training adult youth workers is a vitally important part of youth ministry, no matter the size of congregation or the number of leaders. Effective adult youth leaders are the result of intentional efforts at recruiting, training, and encouraging adults with the requisite gifts willing to give of themselves to ministry. There is a strong relationship between effective adult leaders and the training provided in youth ministry as identified in the survey findings:

Training of Adult Leaders (9 = highest score)	Adult Leader Rating
Adult Worker Satisfaction	6.82
Adult Worker's Creativity	6.72
Effectiveness of Training	5.85
Training Emphasis	5.12
Training of Adult Youth Workers	5.52

A distinctive characteristic of the adult leaders in the study is their dedication and long-tenured service. Adult leaders who serve for longer periods of time seem to be an important positive factor in the faith maturity of youth.

Youth Leadership

One of the significant discoveries in the study was the large numbers of young people in leadership. Congregations, large and small, intentionally involve youth in leadership. They develop youth leaders, share real responsibilities, and delegate tasks. They encourage young people in leadership by providing resources and training throughout the life and ministries of their congregations.

Young people lead congregational activities: teaching classes, guiding worship, serving on committees, and helping with programs and events. As a result, these young people mature in their faith, develop important leadership skills, and are drawn more deeply into the life of the congregation. These youth scored significantly higher than their peers on a scale called "Leadership Development Activities" which measures the prevalence of congregational leadership training and the levels of leadership participation by youth. Young people who are apprenticed into leadership are more likely to develop more mature levels of faith. Congregations develop

strategies for discovering and utilizing young people's strengths and spiritual gifts

Youth lead through expressions of faith and servant witness. They speak privately and publically about their faith with others in the congregation. They bring their friends to worship, Bible studies, youth activities, mission trips, retreats, and youth events. Younger youth watch their older peers and learn from their example. Congregations benefit from this witness of young people—young people lead others in the church to greater engagement in ministry.

Young people in the study are given opportunities to exercise their gifts and talents in worship, education, music and service. They are considered as able and gifted as the adults in the congregation. Many congregations utilize Bible studies around spiritual giftedness and gift inventories as a framework for identifying young peoples' gifts and strengths. Identifying these young peoples' gifts and apprenticing them into leadership begins in the early grades and continues through high school.

Youth also lead through relationships with their peers. Many of the churches in the study have embedded a sense of responsibility for mentoring the young into the culture of the congregation. High school youth are apprenticed into leadership by serving as mentors, small group co-leaders, and big brothers and sisters to their younger counterparts.

They often serve as team leaders in their youth ministries. As young people lead youth ministry activities, adults are guiding, mentoring and coaching.

Conclusion

The EYM congregations present a portrait of the strong impact faith communities can have on the faith and lives of young people when churches set their minds to fully enfranchise young people in their life and ministry. When pastors, congregational leaders, parents and adult youth leaders work together to promote real commitment to young people as full members of the body of Christ and carry that commitment across the life and mission of the entire congregation, teenagers mature in faith and grow to respect and love their church. The EYM study demonstrates how age-level youth ministry and ministries with family are dependent upon and greatly enhanced by congregations setting young people and youth ministry as one of its essential priorities. If a congregation is not willing to make this commitment, youth and youth ministry will always be tangential and second rate. Congregational commitment to young people is essential for effective ministry with youth.



For more information about the Exemplary Youth Ministry Project go to www.exemplarym.com and www.luthersem.edu/exemplary

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Faith Assets™ Assessment Tool

The Faith Assets can provide a common language to involve all members of the congregation in discovering their role in the lives of young people. Use this assessment tool to reflect on the **priority** and **practice** of the 44 Faith Assets in the life of your congregation and youth ministry. The Assessment Tool can be used with church staff, key leadership, and/or leadership councils to conduct an overall assessment of the congregation's impact on young people. It can be used by the youth ministry team, as well church staff and key leaders, to assess the effectiveness of the youth ministry effort. This tool is best used in group settings where there can be discussion and shared analysis. Begin by giving people time to complete the assessment individually. Then, use the following process to share reflections and analysis, and plan for improvement in each of the four asset groupings.

Assessment Process

1. Select your first Faith Asset grouping for analysis: 1) Congregational Faith and Qualities, 2) Youth Ministry Qualities, 3) Family/Household Faith, or 4) Leadership.
2. Develop a profile of current practices and activities for this Faith Asset grouping: *How does our congregation (as a whole community, as youth ministry, and/or as leaders) promote these Faith Assets?*
3. Develop a composite score of the group's assessment of the **priority** of the Faith Assets in this grouping.
4. Discuss the reasons for people's ratings using the following questions: a) *Is this an accurate picture of our congregation's priorities in this asset area?* b) *Why do we believe it is accurate or inaccurate?* c) *Should a particular asset be a higher priority than it currently is?*
5. Develop a composite score of the group's assessment of the **practice** of the Faith Assets in this grouping.
6. Discuss the reasons for people's ratings using the following questions: a) *Is this an accurate rating of our congregation's practices in this asset area?* b) *Why do we believe our rating is accurate or inaccurate?* c) *How does our rating compare with the quality and scope of our specific activities for these Faith Assets? Which assets do we need to develop more fully?*
7. Identify the Faith Assets in this grouping that your congregation needs to make a higher priority and/or develop more effective practices.
8. Plan for improvement to strengthen the Faith Assets that you have identified as important areas for growth: 1) brainstorm potential strategies to develop the Faith Asset, 2) select one or more strategies for action, and 3) develop an action plan with implementation steps, budget, leadership, and dates for completion.

Part 1. Congregational Faith & Qualities

Priority 1=low, 5 = high	Congregational Faith	Practice 1=low, 5=high
1 2 3 4 5	1. God's Living Presence: The congregation possesses a sense of God's living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	2. Centrality of Faith: The congregation recognizes and participates in God's sustaining and transforming life and work.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	3. Emphasizes Prayer: The congregation practices the presence of God as individuals and community through prayer and worship.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	4. Focus on Discipleship: The congregation is committed to knowing and following Jesus Christ.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	5. Emphasizes Scripture: The congregation values the authority of Scripture in its life and mission.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	6. Centrality of Mission: The congregation consistently witnesses, serves and promotes moral responsibility, and seeks justice.	1 2 3 4 5

Priority 1=low, 5 = high	Congregational Qualities	Practice 1=low, 5=high
1 2 3 4 5	7. Supports Youth Ministry: Youth and ministry with young people are high priorities for the congregation.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	8. Demonstrates Hospitality: The congregation values and welcomes all people, especially youth.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	9. Strives for Excellence: The congregation sets high standards, evaluates, and engages in continuous improvement.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	10. Encourages Thinking: The congregation welcomes questions and reflection on faith and life.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	11. Creates Community: The congregation reflects high quality personal and group relationships.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	12. Encourages Support Groups: The congregation engages members in study, conversation, and prayer about faith in daily life.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	13. Promotes Worship: The congregation expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	14. Fosters Ethical Responsibility: The congregation encourages individual and social moral responsibility.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	15. Promotes Service: The congregation sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	16. Demonstrates Effective Practices: The congregation engages in a wide variety of ministry practices and activities.	1 2 3 4 5
	Youth Involvement in the Congregation	
1 2 3 4 5	17. Participate in the Congregation: Youth are engaged in a wide spectrum of congregational relationships and practices.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	18. Assume Ministry Leadership: Youth are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational activities.	1 2 3 4 5

Part 2. Youth Ministry Qualities

Priority 1=low, 5 = high	Youth Ministry Qualities	Practice 1=low, 5=high
1 2 3 4 5	19. Establishes a Caring Environment: Youth Ministry provides multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	20. Develops Quality Relationship: Youth Ministry develops authentic relationships among youth and adults establishing an environment of presence and life engagement.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	21. Focus on Jesus Christ: Youth ministry's mission, practices, and relationships are inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	22. Considers Life Issues: Youth ministry is values and addresses the full range of young people's lives.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	23. Uses Many Approaches: Youth ministry intentionally and creatively employs multiple activities appropriate to the ministry's mission and context.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	24. Organized Well: Youth ministry engages participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations.	1 2 3 4 5

Part 3. Family / Household Faith

Priority 1=low, 5 = high	Family / Household Faith	Practice 1=low, 5=high
1 2 3 4 5	25. Possess Strong Parental Faith: Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	26. Promotes Family Faith Practices: Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	27. Reflects Family Harmony: Family members' expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	28. Equips Parents: The congregation offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equips parents for nurturing faith at home.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	29. Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships: The congregation offers parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.	1 2 3 4 5

Part 4. Leadership

Priority 1=low, 5 = high	Leadership of the Pastor	Practice 1=low, 5=high
1 2 3 4 5	30. Spiritual Influence: The pastor knows and models the transforming presence of God in life and ministry.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	31. Interpersonal Competence: The pastor builds a sense of community and relates well with adults and youth.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	32. Supports Youth Ministry: The pastor understands, guides, and advocates for youth ministry.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	33. Supports Leaders: The pastor affirms and mentors youth and adults leading youth ministry.	1 2 3 4 5
	The Leadership of the Youth Minister	
1 2 3 4 5	34. Provides Competent Leadership: The youth minister demonstrates superior theological, theoretical, and practical knowledge and skill in leadership.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	35. Models Faith: The youth minister is a role model reflecting a living faith for youth and adults.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	36. Mentors Faith Life: The youth minister assists adult leaders and youth in their faith life both one-on-one and in groups.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	37. Develops Teams: The youth minister reflects a clear vision and attracts gifted youth and adults into leadership	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	38. Knows Youth: The youth minister knows youth and the changes in youth culture and utilizes these understandings in ministry.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	39. Establishes Effective Relationships: The youth minister enjoys effective relationships with youth, parents, volunteers, and staff.	1 2 3 4 5
	Youth and Adult Leadership	
1 2 3 4 5	40. Equip for Peer Ministry: Youth practice friendship, care-giving, and outreach supported by training and caring adults.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	41. Establish Adult-Youth Mentoring: Adults engage youth in the Christian faith and life supported by informed leadership.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	42. Participate in Training: Youth and adults are equipped for ministry in an atmosphere of high expectations.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	43. Posses Vibrant Faith: Youth and adult leaders possess and practice a vital and informed faith.	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	44. Competent Adult Volunteers: Adults foster authentic relationships and effective practices in youth ministry with a clear vision strengthen by training and support.	1 2 3 4 5



Forming Young Disciples: Opportunities for the Faith Formation of Adolescents

Tom East

How can we form a living faith within adolescents that will empower them to know and live the faith today? Congregational leaders, pastors, youth ministers, religious educators, and parents are all asking this question. For some this is a concern forged with urgency because they sense that their current efforts are ineffective. Others perceive this as a challenge to make the Good News new and vital in the lives of today's teenagers.

At the Center for Ministry Development we have had the opportunity to be involved with hundreds of congregations over the past five years as we conduct research in youth ministry and faith formation. This research has put us in touch with ministry leaders, parents, and youth, and has demonstrated that adolescent faith formation

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is working in many faith communities, large and small, across the nation. These congregations are employing different approaches and using various resources, but there is a common factor in all: forming faith in adolescents is an intentional congregational effort and priority. These communities recognize the graced moment of standing with an adolescent as he or she prepares to move into young adulthood. As a faith community, they seize this opportunity to strengthen family faith conversations, engage youth in the congregation, and share ways for living the faith, day by day with youth in ways that are bold, challenging, and practical.

by providing an encounter with Christ and promoting discipleship.

- ♦ To inform, we nurture people's minds and hearts with knowledge of the Christian faith so that who they are and how they live is shaped and influenced by what they know.
- ♦ To form, we nurture people's identity and lifestyle as disciples of Christ.
- ♦ To transform, we promote the personal and social transformation of the world according to the kingdom of God that Jesus preached.¹ (Groome, 13-15)

of youth for Christian living that occurs in communities within relationships of trust. This formation has numerous contexts and dimensions.

Evangelization and Discipleship

The evangelization of youth and of the culture in which they live is the context for faith formation of adolescents. Youth are hungering to meet the living Christ, to come to know the good news, and to encounter a compelling vision for the Christian life. To facilitate this encounter, the faith community must help youth to meet Christ anew: (Our task in faith formation is to) "present Christ as the Son of God, friend, guide, and model who can not only be admired but also imitated." (*National Directory for Catechesis*, 199)

"The point of incarnational ministry is not to model Christ so youth will follow us but—to use Martin Luther's language—to become "Christs" for our neighbor, incarnating Christ's love transparently so that youth will follow him" (Dean, 28).

In his opening remarks for World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI made this challenge: "Let Jesus surprise us during these days." Adolescence is a particularly rich and important opportunity to help young people be surprised by Christ and meet Jesus again for the first time. When I introduce my adolescent children to friends and relatives that they have not seen in several years, in a sense, they are meeting these people for the first time because they are meeting them as adolescents. Similarly, adults are now meeting an adolescent whom they knew as a child. Adolescent experiences are built on those of childhood but are also fresh, new,

. . . congregations are employing different approaches and using various resources, but there is a common factor in all: forming faith in adolescents is an intentional congregational effort and priority.

This article brings together research and practice in adolescent faith formation and explores this through a variety of themes: 1) aims of adolescent faith formation, 2) the world of the adolescent faith learner, 3) settings and models for adolescent faith formation, and 4) curriculum and methods.

Part I. Aims of Adolescent Faith Formation

Thomas Groome proposes that the aim of faith formation for people of all ages is to inform, form, and transform persons and communities

In other words, faith formation is intended to impact the head, heart, and hands of adolescents by helping them know, care about, and actively live the faith. This type of formation occurs within relationships. A web of relationships forms youth for Christian faith: relationships between youth and their family, youth with their peers and adult leaders, youth and the congregation. The congregation because of deep faith and a genuine affection for youth supports these relationships. These life-changing relationships are nurtured through the life of the congregation, including specific programs and strategies.

Understood in this way, adolescent faith formation is the intentional and informal formation

and surprising. These encounters are not one-time experiences; they happen again and again over time within the much larger process of evangelization, within which, youth strive to become disciples.

In the *General Directory for Catechesis*, the process for evangelization is described:

- ♦ transforming people and cultures through love
- ♦ bearing witness to the new way of life that characterizes Christians
- ♦ proclaiming the gospel and calling people to conversion
- ♦ incorporating people into the community by means of catechesis and sacraments
- ♦ continuous pastoral activity aimed at strengthening communion
- ♦ inspiring people to continue the mission of the Church, and sending them to proclaim the gospel through words and actions. (GDC, no. 48)

Maura Hagarty connects each of these phases to the practical dimensions of youth's journey in faith. A young person

- ♦ comes to know love
- ♦ is exposed to a new way of life through relationships with Christians, including peers and adults
- ♦ hears the gospel and is inspired to explore its implications
- ♦ is initiated through the sacraments and catechesis
- ♦ participates in the life of the community, including liturgy
- ♦ commits to continuing the church's mission. (Hagarty, 4)

Congregations can look at these steps and ask the practical questions: How can we help youth come to know the love of God? How can youth be exposed to a new way of life? How will they hear the gospel and explore its implications? How will youth be initiated into

Christian living? How will we promote youth participation in liturgy and worship? How can we

adolescence as creating an integrated sense of self-identity. Without this integration, a young

Youth are asking different questions: who am I? Where do I belong? What will I do with my life? Where can I invest my life and energies? Where is there an adventure large enough for me to be part of?

help youth to commit their lives in mission and service? "The challenge of evangelizing young people is clear: we are called to proclaim the Good News so that it responds to the lives and world of adolescents, invites their response, and empowers them to live as disciples today" (Ekstrom, 69).

Empowering youth as disciples of Jesus the Christ is the overarching aim for Christian faith formation. Adults who love youth are asking this question: how will we share a living faith with youth whom we care about? Youth are asking different questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? What will I do with my life? Where can I invest my life and energies? Where is there an adventure large enough for me to be part of? Youth are literally in the process of searching for the adventure of their life. As a Christian community we have the opportunity and the responsibility to present the good news and promote discipleship in Christ as this adventure.

Christian Faith Identity and Practices

In his classic work on adolescent development, David Elkind described the primary task of

person's self image is like the varied images displayed in a funhouse mirror. A young person behaves one way with his or her friends, another way at school, and a different way at home with family.

Faith identity is an important part of the identity that youth are forming through all of this. In fact, religious identity goes beyond the many functional identities that young people live with, since it is about their relationship with God. John Shea describes it this way: [Faith identity] "points to the ultimate identity of a people, formed in living relationship with a transcendent-immanent God, who has been revealed in Jesus Christ and who continues to be present in the Church" (Shea, 2).

As ministry leaders and religious educators, we sometimes worry that the youth who join us in prayer and faith sharing on Sunday act very differently at school on Wednesday. Yet this isn't just a problem for youth; inconsistency is part of the human condition. How can we help form a faith identity in young people that they can act on and live throughout their lives? After all, we don't want youth ministry or participation in the church to be one more competing activity in young people's already busy lives. To use a

computer screen as an analogy, we don't want "faith" to be just one more icon on the screen, something to click on and off. We hope that faith takes its rightful place in young people's lives. Faith is not another program or activity; faith is the operating system. It's the thing that makes everything else make sense.

For faith to become the operating system, youth must see and know people of vibrant faith. They also need to be immersed and formed in the practices of faith. Practices are actions and behaviors that have values embedded within them. If you wanted to learn to be a photographer, you could read books and study photography. But to become a truly great photographer you need to spend time with a great photographer. Through this mentoring, you would learn the little things and the disciplines that make someone excellent at their craft; you would learn the practices of photography.

Faith practices are like that; they are actions and behaviors we do as people of faith. Dorothy Bass describes it this way in *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*: "We call these practices because they have to be practiced. Practices don't live on the pages of a book but in the bodies, hands, feet, eyes, and compassion of real people, and learning practices means doing them not just once but many times" (Bass and Richter, 9). Congregations, families, and youth ministry

communities form youth in the practices of faith as an integral part of faith formation.

Part 2. The World of the Adolescent Learner

To accompany youth on their journey of faith, we must understand their world, with its accompanying joys and challenges. Adolescents are on a journey that takes them from the protective environment of childhood to the choice-filled world of adulthood. The word "adolescence" comes from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means, "to grow up." Where once it referred to the teenage years, adolescence today is understood to begin at age ten or eleven and continue through the mid-twenties. During the first several years of this time frame, young people are experiencing the physical changes of puberty. Their social world is expanding and they are engaged in more complex social situations. Family continues to be a major influence and source of support even as peers and the community are becoming more important.

Over the course of these years, youth will encounter a variety of experiences, engage with a variety of communities, learn about many topics, and grow in a variety of skills and abilities.

The journey of adolescence takes young people on a path towards responsible adult living. As people of faith, we know that the path of this journey is not random; our loving God created each young person in love and has a plan for each one's life. We are called to accompany young people on this journey so that faith-filled youth will become faithful adult disciples. When Jesus accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he listened to their questions, he explained the truths of faith, he revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread, and he sent them forth to tell others. This is the job description of the faith community, and in particular, the job of the ministry leaders and teachers, who are acting on behalf of the Christian community.

To walk with youth, we must learn their questions and understand their experiences. Each one's story will be unique, but many of the patterns of development are shared.

Young Adolescents and Their Families

The young adolescent, ages ten through fifteen years of age, is typically in middle school, junior high, or the first years of high school. During these years, they are experiencing the most rapid series of physical changes since infancy. The emotional and social changes that accompany puberty can be challenging, even overwhelming. Intellectually, young people are moving from concrete thinking towards abstract thinking. Abstract thinkers are able to imagine the consequences of actions and "what might happen if." Abstract thinking is critical for faith growth and moral development, as well as science, humanities, and math.

For faith to become the operating system, youth must see and know people of vibrant faith. They also need to be immersed and formed in the practices of faith.

This is a time when youth are beginning to develop their identity and express their individuality, even as they strive to belong within their peer group. This quest is often expressed in the clothes they wear and their physical appearance, as well as choices about styles of communicating and what peer groups to associate with. Friendship and belonging are of huge importance at this age. They are also experiencing faith in new ways; though young adolescents continue to experience faith primarily through their senses and their direct experiences, they are beginning to recognize God's presence in a new way within the community.

As the young person changes, likewise the family goes through a transition from being a family with children to being a family with youth. As Leif Kehrwald states, "The changes of adolescence—puberty, new ways of thinking, wider sphere of social activity and relationships, greater autonomy—present the entire family with a new set of challenges. In fact, it would be fair to say that the whole family experiences adolescence" (Kehrwald, 34)

This change means renegotiating patterns of communication, recreation, chores, and relationships. The task for these families in transition is to allow increasing independence while continuing to provide structure and close relationships.

Older Adolescents and Their Families

The older adolescent, ages fourteen to eighteen, is typically in high school and experiencing continued physical changes as well as encountering more complex social, intellectual, and emotional situations. This is a time when

youth are focused on developing their identity and are grappling with a variety of questions about authority, gender identification, and self-concept. They are finding themselves. As they develop their identity, they are looking for role models and mentors. They are developing a personal moral code and are growing in their capacity for mutual, more intimate relationships. Parents remain an important influence, but the approval of peers and people whom youth admire has gained in influence.

Because they are searching and exploring so many new domains in life, youth often question faith and assumptions they have held since childhood. In a sense, youth are unpacking the faith that has been handed to them by their parents and those who love them. In this process, they seek out consistency, and can seem negative or aggressive in their questioning. This experience can be disturbing and jarring to adults. We can see the questions as a rejection of faith. When youth question, they are not rejecting faith or the community; they are taking the necessary step of appropriating faith knowledge and practice into their lives. As a community of faith, we are called to surround them with love, care, and patience as we allow them to live the questions.

While youth are searching, adult family members are typically approaching midlife and are often in

the process of reflecting on their own lives and faith. Many families are beginning to provide care for the older generation, who are also in transition. In the midst of all of this reflection, re-sorting, and transition, the family seeks to continue to provide a spiritual home for all members. Congregations have the opportunity to minister to these families in this transition moment and provide resources so that family members can support each other with prayer, faith conversations, love, and care.

Adolescents and Brain Development

In recent years, scientists have learned a great deal about brain development. Some of these findings help us understand what a child and adolescent retains and what they lose in the learning process. You may have heard the saying, "it's like riding a bike; it just comes back to you." Yet it seems that this would depend on when you last rode a bike.²

Around ages eleven through thirteen, youth are experiencing growth in their frontal cortex, which is helping them develop the ability to have more control over impulses and make better judgments. This growth is accompanied by a period of "pruning" in which unused areas of the brain are cut off to strengthen the paths for areas that are used frequently. This pruning and

“ . . . most American youth faithfully mirror the aspirations, lifestyles, practices, and problems of the adult world into which they are being socialized ”

growth is an important stage in brain development. What youth choose to do or not do could impact them for life. Dr. Giedd calls this the “use it or lose it principle,” and explained further, “If a teen is doing music or sports or academics, those are the cells and connections that will be hardwired. If they’re lying on the couch or playing video games or MTV, those are the cells and connections that are going to survive” (Spinks, 3).

What does “use it or lose it” mean to us as we share faith with adolescents? Well, it sounds like if you rode a bike as child but didn’t ride a bike as a young adolescent, you would lose that ability and memory. This makes this period of time all the more important for sharing faith and engaging youth in the practices of faith so that faithful living is an experience that is remembered and practiced for life.

Youth Knowledge and Practice of the Faith

Pastoral leaders and researchers are concerned about young people’s faith understanding and practice, as evidenced by numerous studies, conferences, and conversations. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton at the University of North Carolina conducted an important national research study, “The National Study on Youth and Religion.” The results were reported in the book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Regarding young people’s participation and beliefs, the study found the following:

Youth and Participation

- ◆ The vast majority of American youth and parents of youth are religious and in particular, Christian.

- ◆ Though many have proposed that youth are “spiritual but not religious,” youth did not identify with this statement. Most youth do not seem to seek spiritual growth outside of denominational participation.
- ◆ Most youth intend to remain practicing in the denomination in which they currently participate.
- ◆ Youth who participate in a youth group, retreat, work camp and other programs have higher levels of faith understanding and practice.
- ◆ Youth who are very religious also have lower rates of at-risk behaviors and more positive family relationships.
- ◆ Some youth seem to be disenfranchised and do not participate in youth programs. This would include youth from non-practicing families, and segments of the population of Hispanic youth.

Youth and Beliefs

- ◆ Mainline Protestant and Catholic youth were found to be largely inarticulate in stating beliefs and doctrine when compared to conservative Christians and Mormon youth.
- ◆ Youth belief and practice mirrors the belief and practice of their parents.
- ◆ Researchers propose that for many youth and adults an alternative creed is emerging across denominations. This is not a separate religion; it is a watered down creed that inhabits most denominations. The researchers describe this belief system as “moralistic

therapeutic deism.” In this view, an impersonal God wants us to be happy, good, nice, and fair to each other. This creed omits much of the content of traditional Christian belief.

One of the images that the researches use to describe adolescent faith is a “mirror.” “American youth actually share much more in common with adults than they do not share, and most American youth faithfully mirror the aspirations, lifestyles, practices, and problems of the adult world into which they are being socialized” (Smith, 14).

This summary reinforces things that we know and draws attention to the challenges of faith formation in our time. If youth are mirroring the “whateverism” of their parents and the wider culture rather than embracing the deeper truths of faith, the scope of our task in faith formation is clear. The challenge goes beyond valid concerns about the formation of religious educators and ministry leaders who share faith with youth. The challenge goes far beyond the methods to use in the classroom or youth room. Our challenge is evangelizing youth and their families through a bold and dynamic faith that is lived in an exemplary and visible way by a congregation.

Part 3. Settings and Models for Adolescent Faith Formation

Two recent studies on youth ministry and faith formation came to the same conclusion in their overall finding: the life of the congregation itself is the heart of

faith formation for adolescents and their families. In *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, this is described as becoming a “willing congregation.” These congregations are willing to fully engage youth within the community and surround youth with love, care, support and challenge:

[A community] that comes to know and treasure the youth in their midst will experience new ways of praying, celebrating, serving and learning. It is not about always letting youth have their way or about discarding the traditions of a community. But it is about letting youth have a way to truly belong. Youth and the community learn together and are transformed in the process. (East, 10)

In the “Spirit of Youth Ministry Project,” the key finding for effective faith formation of adolescents is described as “the culture or spirit of the congregation.”

A “culture” seems to emerge with its pervasive and distinct “spirit” and “atmosphere” that is more powerful than its component parts. It’s the combination of the core values, people, relationships, expectations, practices, and activities that seems to generate this spirit and atmosphere (Roberto, 3)

These communities form youth through the life and the lived theology of the congregation. Families are supported in sharing faith, and youth are gathered for youth ministry activities and programs. The heart of the formation is the life of the congregation itself. These communities identify and utilize the assets within their congregation to share faith with adolescents. These assets are different for each

community, which creates a very positive starting point for communities seeking to enhance faith formation of adolescents.

According to the asset-building approach, every congregation has faith assets; it is only a question of how many.

Congregations need to discover those that are already at work, and then chart a plan for developing more assets. An asset-building approach offers tangible qualities and practices that every congregation can adopt to nurture a maturing Christian faith for the youth in the congregation. (Roberto, 4)

These studies reinforce what we know from a broad variety of church documents and religious education theory: the faith community is the heart of faith formation. The life of the community sponsors Christian living. The community engages and includes youth, while at the same time providing faith formation for youth in age-specific ways, using the resources of the wider community.

Adolescents often rely upon all four of these settings: congregation, family, peers, and the wider community. For younger adolescents, the family remains the key place to explore and grow in faith, while at the same time, the peer group gains importance. Young people participate in congregational life and look for consistency between the faith they learn about and the lived practice of the community. Some young adolescents who are curious about faith topics explore these through books or web sites. Many more participate in events such as conferences, retreats, or service programs. Older adolescents tend to rely more on their peers and are able to engage in the life of the

congregation and use wider community resources more readily.

Experience of these settings also sets youth on the course to continue their faith growth as young adults, and adults.

1. **Family.** Families share faith through their lived practices and teachable moments of faith sharing and prayer.
 2. **Age-specific peer group.** Congregations gather adolescents in peer groups to participate in youth ministry, religious education and sacramental formation. In these peer groups, youth learn the faith in ways that connect to their development and faith maturity.
 3. **Congregation.** The life of the faith community itself forms faith in youth through worship, learning, community, and service. Adolescents strive to belong, and through their participation in the intergenerational community they learn and integrate faith.
 4. **Wider community and individualized learning.** The wider community includes the variety of ways that youth learn and grow in faith using the resources in the wider community. This includes participation in inter-church and regional youth conferences and events. It also includes the resources for faith formation found in print and online media.
- An effective model for faith formation of young adolescents will take these four settings into account. Typically, a congregation will choose one of these settings as the primary setting for intentional faith formation, while strengthening and making connections to the other settings. For instance, a community might choose to have intentional faith formation occur primarily

within the peer group and would provide support for family faith sharing, promote congregational involvement, and encourage youth to learn on their own by providing resources and starting points. Another community might begin with intergenerational faith formation and complement these efforts with peer group gatherings and support for family faith sharing.

Effective Faith Formation for Youth

Three models for the effective faith formation of youth emerge from research and pastoral practice.

1. Intentional faith formation infused throughout youth ministry and involvement in congregational life. In these communities, the faith content needed by adolescents is communicated throughout the programs and strategies of youth ministry. Some themes are addressed during the weekly youth community gathering. Others are addressed within faith sharing series or retreats. Other aspects are built into experiences such as youth preparing for a summer service trip or incorporating Catholic social teaching into their preparation. Youth who become involved in worship and liturgical ministries experience formation as part of their practical preparation. The faith formation in these communities is planned and intentional although it is woven throughout a variety of gatherings and involvements.

2. Intentional faith formation is part of the whole community in an intergenerational model. In these congregations, people of all ages participate in faith learning as an intergenerational community. The life of the congregation becomes the

starting point as the community gathers to prepare for the events of Church life, and learn the faith in the process. Often times, these learning events begin with the whole community gathered and include time when age groups are divided for teaching and faith exploration among peers. In congregations that are employing the intergenerational model as their primary faith formation effort, youth ministries can count on the community to provide the intentional faith formation. Other aspects of formation needed in particular ways by young people can be addressed through other aspects of youth ministry.

3. Intentional faith formation is a distinct element of youth ministry. In these churches, the faith formation is a distinct element within youth ministry. Religious education programs are offered to youth on a regular basis. The youth who participate in these programs are encouraged to participate in other aspects of youth ministry.

- faith sharing series
- home-based faith sharing programs for youth and their families.

Whatever the model, effective congregations strive to provide faith formation in a way that is planned, intentional, and collaborative.

Part 4. Curriculum and Methods

Faith formation of adolescents includes witness of the community and instruction in the faith content. Both of these components create the curriculum for faith formation.

The word “curriculum” comes from a Latin word meaning to run a race. In current use, people generally think of the curriculum as “the course to be run,” which implies that it is not the actual running. Since the content of faith education is most clearly understood as the beliefs and practices of the people, then faith formation needs to be understood as an educational

... consider two kinds of curriculum. The general curriculum would include...the spirit or culture of the community. The specific curriculum would include the communities, programs, and strategies directed towards adolescents and their families.

Some of the methods used for these elements include:

- weekly classes at grade level
- sacramental preparation programs for Confirmation
- week-long religious education programs offered in the summer

ministry that is embedded in and involves the entire Christian community. Therefore, the opportunities and methods for developing faith are as diverse as the community of faith itself.

This perspective significantly shifts our understanding of

curriculum. In her book *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church*, Maria Harris emphasizes that we must consistently distinguish between the curriculum of education and the curriculum of schooling. She suggests that “curriculum” is about the mobilizing of creative educative powers in such a way as to fashion a “People of God” through the practices of the people. This is very different than the traditional notion of curriculum as stacks of teacher guides and student textbooks.

In planning for effective faith formation of adolescents, one should consider two kinds of curriculum. The *general curriculum* would include the community itself, the environment and hospitality, the team of ministry leaders, and the spirit or culture of the community. The *specific curriculum* would include the communities, programs, and strategies directed towards adolescents and their families. This would include the variety of efforts that promote faith learning, prayer and worship, justice and service, and community life. These efforts could occur within the whole community, a community of peers, the family, or for individual youth.

One way to think about this distinction is to consider the differences between non-verbal and verbal communication. General curriculum is like the non-verbal communication of a community. This communication is constantly revealing the authentic nature, message, and Word alive within the faith community. Specific curriculum is like verbal

communication, which is intentional and focused on communicating specific content and messages clearly.

Dynamic Faith Learning

Communities that are effective in forming faith in adolescents recognize their role as faith witnesses and provide the specific curriculum for adolescent faith formation through dynamic faith learning opportunities. The following three principles summarize what we are learning about dynamic faith learning from communities across the nation.

Principle 1: Effective faith formation helps youth enter into the experience of living faith.³ It engages them experientially—head, heart, and lifestyles—in the learning activity, providing them with direct, first-hand experiences; respects and incorporates their experience in the learning activity; and engages them in real-world learning and application, making the connection between learning and life, and faith and life.

When working with postmoderns, we can never underestimate the e-factor: experiential. Postmoderns will do most anything not to lose connection with the experience of life. (Sweet, 22) This principle addresses three key aspects for utilizing experience within faith learning. First, the learning process should be experiential, allowing youth to put themselves completely into the learning process and

providing youth with an experience of faith. Second, we should access the lived experience of adolescents and help them to name and claim these experiences as they learn and grow in faith. Third, we need to help youth apply what they are learning to their everyday choices and situations. Consider these ideas:

- **Connect youth to adult members of the congregation.** Identify members of the congregation who are living the faith in an exemplary way. Connect youth to these adult mentors to accompany them in their actions on behalf of faith.
- **Provide affective experiences of prayer.** Youth experience faith through their senses and through their experience of belonging within a community. Prayer provides a direct contact with the sacred and builds young people’s relationship with God.
- **Provide retreat experiences.** Retreats provide an incredible opportunity for youth to experience Christ’s presence within prayer, witness, community, and sacrament. The extended time of a retreat and the carefully chosen elements help youth to go deeper in their experience.
- **Provide opportunities for service.** One young person described her experience of service in this way, “when I was caring for the person who was hungry and lonely, I felt as though I was touching the Body of Christ.” Experiences of service to those in need are hands-on opportunities for youth to be in touch with Christ’s presence.

**When working with postmoderns,
we can never underestimate the e-factor: experiential.**

Principle 2: Effective faith formation uses a variety of methods that engage the senses. It incorporates a variety of multi-sensory methods to engage the whole person, such as art, drama, music, dance, storytelling, media, prayer, rituals; and engages them in construction, discovery, and exploration of the topic or concept.

This principle reminds us of the importance of engaging the senses and addressing a variety of learning styles. We are also challenged to move the faith learner from being a passive listener to being someone who is helping uncover and discover the faith content. Consider these methods for presenting and processing faith content:

- interviews
- panel presentations
- guest speakers
- movies, TV, popular songs, and story connections
- presenting content and faith sharing within prayer
- skits, drama, and Scripture re-enactments
- Scripture search
- murals, collages, posters, and slogans
- station-based learning activities
- “guided tour” museum-style presentations

Principle 3: Effective faith formation builds a faith learning community.

It utilizes collaborative and group-centered formats for study, inquiry, activities, and sharing; provides an environment that is characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and inquiry; and is participative and interactive, actively engaging them in the learning process.

In the *National Directory for Catechesis*, the United States Catholic Bishops describe the importance of a learning community. [Effective faith

formation] “involves group participation in an environment that is characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and care, so that young people can hear and respond to God’s call (fostering the freedom to search and question, to express one’s own point of view, and to respond in faith to that call)” (NDC, 201).

Youth are naturally going to learn and grow in faith more comfortably in a community where they feel safe, accepted and valued. This principle reminds us of the importance of building community as we promote faith learning. Consider these ideas for building a faith learning community:

- include community builders and team building activities within faith learning
- provide opportunities for youth to share and pray for each other’s concerns
- integrate prayer throughout faith learning
- change groupings: use dyads, triads, and different combinations of small groups to provide an opportunity for youth to get to know one another
- go off-site from the church grounds: participate together in a service project, “pilgrimage” to a place for prayer or take a field trip to a place to experience worship, community or service with another congregation.

Connected Learning

One of the most effective means of providing faith formation is to connect faith learning with other aspects of youth ministry and involvement in church life. Using this method, youth experience formation in Christian teachings on

justice before and after providing direct service. Some youth learn about worship before engaging in liturgical ministries. Other youth learn about specific faith and Scripture themes about leadership prior to becoming part of the youth ministry team.

This method of learning matches with ideas developed by Malcolm Knowles about andragogy, which is his term for the teaching methodology used in adult education. Knowles challenges common assumptions about education:

[Many educators believe that] if we simply pour enough knowledge into people: 1. they will turn out to be good people, and 2. they will know how to make use of their knowledge...we must define the mission of education as to produce competent people—people who are able to apply their knowledge under changing conditions. . . (Knowles, 18-19)

Using the principles of andragogy, we direct learning to close the gap between what the learners now know and what they need to know in order to do what they want to do. Providing connected learning motivates youth to learn the faith because there is something that they want to do, to which this learning is connected. This style of faith learning also helps youth become lifelong learners because they see the connections between faith and action. Other principles of andragogy can help shape faith formation with adolescents by involving youth in planning for their learning, utilizing the experience of learners and involve them in creating shared understanding, connecting learning to faith experiences and vice versa.

The adventure of discipleship begins with an encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter can't be programmed or scheduled, but we can help youth create the time and space to recognize Christ in their midst. We can also engage youth with the congregation that listens to the Word and acts on it in bold and faithful ways.

Mike Theissen conducted research in the Diocese of Rochester, New York that reinforced this style of learning. He found that the most effective adolescent faith formation strategy was actually a Vacation Bible School program that involved thirty adolescents each year as team members. These youth learned key Scripture and faith themes in preparation for leading children through this week of study and celebration of faith. Many of the programs that they identified as effective had similar characteristics.

Based on his research, effective faith formation programs:

- ♦ creatively and fully engage young people in the learning process, often as teachers or peer leaders
- ♦ are intense and necessitate relationship building among the participants
- ♦ often offer something back to the community
- ♦ utilize the gifts of young people and actively involve the whole person (head, heart, and hands) (Theissen, 5)

Another aspect of this research was the intentionality of each program or gathering. Theissen suggests that communities ask critical questions prior to each gathered program or activity for youth.

1. How is God made more visible through this activity, program or model?
2. How will this activity, program or model bring young people into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ?
3. How can I more fully involve young people in this activity, program or model?
4. How can I more fully partner with parents in this activity, program or model?
5. How can I model and share my own faith journey through this activity, program or model? (Theissen, 3)

Conclusion

The adventure of discipleship begins with an encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter can't be programmed or scheduled, but we can help youth create the time and space to recognize Christ in their midst. We can also engage youth with the congregation that listens to the Word and acts on it in bold and faithful ways. Research about adolescents and faith formation points toward the need for congregations to name and claim adolescent faith formation as a priority.

Consider these directions to help you bring together youth, parents, staff, and ministry leaders in your community to create a shared plan for adolescent faith formation.

1. Assess your community.

- Youth and families: Who are the youth and families? How are they currently involved?
- Strengths and assets: What are the strengths of our community that we can share with youth?
- Areas to grow: What are the areas we need to grow in order to provide dynamic and effective faith formation with adolescents?

2. Develop focused, innovative efforts.

- Choose or strengthen your model for adolescent faith formation.
- Identify your primary setting for faith formation and complement this strategy with other offerings and support in the other settings of faith learning.
- Utilize the assets in your community to provide new methods.

3. Provide connected learning.

Use the calendar for the congregation and youth ministry to create new opportunities for faith learning.

4. Make the most of each contact.

Utilize the five key questions suggested in this article to evaluate each gathering with youth.

5. Work with families.

Provide families of youth with resources to share faith and pray at home.

6. Empower people of vibrant faith to be bold, faithful, and alive in sharing faith and life with youth in the community.

Provide formation for religious educators and ministry leaders so that leaders are empowered to share faith effectively.

In the first section of this article, we named the starting point for faith formation as evangelization. What does it mean to become good news in the lives of adolescents? Good news is not theoretical and it is not general. Good news is something specific and personal. It is something that connects with the bad news in our lives. For someone who is unemployed, good news is the phone call from the employer offering a job. For a parent whose child is injured, good news is the ambulance arriving to help. For someone who is hungry, good news is a bowl of food.

For adolescents, the good news of our faith will be received when it connects with their lives and their world. What are the headlines that youth carry in their hearts? The starting point for any ministry with youth is a stance of listening and compassion for young people. As a faith community we can listen to youth, love them and provide the witness and instruction that guides a new generation of disciples towards bold and transforming faith.

Endnotes

- ¹ Adapted from Thomas Groome, "Of Silver Jubilees and the Ground Gained," *PACE* 25, January 1996, pages 13-20.
- ² See Sarah Spinks, *Frontline* producer, "Adolescent Brains are Works in Progress: Here's Why," www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/work/adolescent.html.
- ³ These principles were developed from findings from the Generations of Faith Project, which focused on effective learning and incorporated the work of Leif Kehrwald, Mariette Martineau, John Roberto, and Joan Weber (Naugatuck, CT: Center for Ministry Development, 2006). See www.generationsoffait.org.

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Faith Formation in Christian Practices with Youth and Young Adults

Don C. Richter

The twentieth century was fascinated with the spiritual formation of youth and young adults. Not just in North America, but throughout the world, leaders of all stripes were obsessed with harnessing the power and passions of youth—for evil purposes as well as for good. If we can just get young people committed to our cause, these leaders reasoned, we can tap their great reservoir of power (*potentia*) and recruit them to suffer (*passio*) and even die for the sake of our enterprise.¹ History has confirmed that these assumptions are well founded. For better or worse, twentieth-century youth movements have defined the religious and political landscape.²

With respect to youth, the twentieth century began in 1904 with the publication of G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence*. Hall described the teenage years as a “golden stage” of life in which the unbridled energies of youth were like a raging mountain river rushing wildly toward the sea. Drawing on the image of a dam, Hall urged society to contain, control, and channel the life energies of the young.

And so within a decade all manner of institutions sprang up to provide “holding environments” for adolescents: the high school movement, scouting, and Christian youth groups and associations. In industrialized countries the timing was optimal, as youth by the thousands were leaving the farm for jobs in the city. How convenient for industrial capitalism that an emergent psychological theory legitimated this large-scale social migration by advocating places of safe harbor for untethered teens and young adults.³

The twentieth century both idolized youth and domesticated them, putting youth on a pedestal while stripping them of rights, worthwhile work, and mature responsibilities. For millennia teenagers had worked alongside adults, contributing to their household economy and the greater social good. Now youth were socially constructed as “adolescents” and held in limbo for an extended period, at the very time of life they experience enormous physical, cognitive, and spiritual changes. With the advent of modern-day marketing and advertising in the early part of the twentieth century, youth came to be viewed as a distinct subculture, a commercial niche ripe for exploitation. The demographic bubbles reflected in the Baby Boom and Echo Boom generations each, in turn, accelerated this trend.⁴

The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson posited “identity formation” as the central task of adolescence. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Erikson observed how teens become a substantial social

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force through negotiating ideologies and values. Beliefs matter, claimed Erikson, especially in conjunction with behaviors shaped by those beliefs. Religious movements have recognized this and have long appealed to the ideological hunger of young people. Likewise, totalitarian movements—whether from the right or left, whether defiantly atheistic or stridently religious—make their primary pitch to the hearts and minds of youth. Convert young people and your project will become self-perpetuating.

The twentieth century did not end with the apocalyptic predictions of Y2K. The punctuation mark occurred on September 11, 2001, when the spiritual formation of young Islamic jihadists came to fruition. For those who consider ministry with youth simplistic or beneath their dignity or the stepping stone to *real* ministry with adults, let's be clear about what's at stake. Al-Qaeda is powerful and pernicious precisely because this organization effectively recruits and trains young people; it is an effective transnational model of youth ministry. For Christian communities and for the many moderate Islamic communities that hope to promote a different worldview, we must ask ourselves: are we prepared to invest our best time, talent, and treasure to strengthen alternative, life-giving models of ministry with youth?⁵

Faith Shapes a Way of Life

Christian faith is not an achievement but a gift, the assurance of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ. Faith is both personal (God loves and redeems me) and communal (God loves and redeems the whole world). Faith in both senses involves believing, of course. Belief, however, does not operate in a vacuum but comes to make sense in the midst of life. Life-shaping belief is dynamic; it gets reframed as individuals grow and change over the course of a lifetime. This does not happen automatically; rather, growth in faith can occur at any developmental age or stage. Some persons experience intense growth in faith during a brief period. Others may coast for a lifetime on childhood faith.

During much of the twentieth century religious educators asked: How do we teach and learn Christian faith in ways that are developmentally appropriate? This is an important question—but it is a secondary one. It is rooted in a psychological paradigm and focuses attention on the capacities of the individual learner. This question highlights the capacity of youth to think in a new key (Piaget, Kohlberg), to postpone commitments in service of a “psychosocial moratorium” (Erikson, Marcia), and

to search for personal meaning by going on a “faith journey.”

Without dismissing developmental insights, religious educators first need to ask a different question: How are Christian practices shaping a way of life within this faith community, and how do we teach all the members of this community through their participation in those practices? The practices paradigm prompts educators to evaluate the ecclesial health of a parish or congregation by paying attention to fundamental activities, such as honoring the body, offering hospitality, sharing life at table, giving and receiving forgiveness, prayer, and singing our lives to God.⁶ Evaluation questions include:

- Which practices are flourishing and seem most vital within this parish?
- How are people being initiated into these vital practices and led into deeper participation and more faithful discipleship?
- Which practices seem anemic and need a spiritual infusion?
- Where in the Body of Christ today or throughout history can we find wisdom and resources for strengthening Christian practices?

Knowing the practice profile of a parish is a crucial starting point for the spiritual formation of youth and young adults. Before inviting young people into a particular way of life we need to have some sense of what this way of life entails, and how it shapes our own daily lives as people of faith. This is not a simple or straightforward matter, for within North America myriad lifestyles compete for our loyalty. Followers of Jesus are not above the fray, for the competition takes place within each of us as well. That's why youth ministry needs to be understood as “growing in faith with youth.” Youth ministry is not something adults do to or for young people. It's something adults and youth do together, in partnership, as we congregate and as we go out into the world to serve.

Way to Live

From 2000-2002 the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith assembled eighteen adults and eighteen teens to collaborate on a writing project about Christian practices. Our goal was to produce a book for a teenage audience that would portray the abundant way of life Jesus invites us to live *now*—in our family, our neighborhood, our school, our world. Our hope was to provide substantive guidance and spiritual nourishment for teens as well as for their parents and other adults who care for them. The

resources we designed encourage adults themselves to grow in faith with youth.

As we prepared the book, our teen and adult group gathered four times for writer conferences, although we didn't jump into writing the chapters right away. First we spent time exploring different practices in small groups, considering biblical and personal stories, songs, and images related to each practice. We played and worshiped together as we became a community shaped by ongoing practices. Between meetings, we stayed in touch with other via mail and e-mail. Once we established sufficient trust, we presented drafts for mutual critique, aided by a writing coach. Our young contributors took their roles to heart, keeping teen sensibilities before us as *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* took shape. When we met the final time to review our manuscript, we also planned strategies for a companion leader's guide and website.⁷

In the first chapter of *Way to Live*, fifteen-year-old Martha reflects on a mission trip with her youth group. Martha notes how a way of life unfolded for her and for her companions while on the road. Each day they cared for children and helped an elderly man clean his house. They ate meals together, read the Bible, prayed, played, and sang. They didn't worry about their appearance or who had the latest cool stuff, because they all wore work clothes and lived out of their suitcases. There were no cars, no TVs, no cell phones, no i-Pods, no e-mail, no commercial clutter. With few distractions, Martha began to notice a pattern emerging: "I was getting involved in what God was doing. It was like God was working through me to care for those little kids, who usually don't get the kind of attention I was giving them. It was like I was becoming God's hands in that place." (*Way to Live*, 2)

Back in her Midwestern home Martha finds herself yearning for the clarity of life she experienced on her trip. Sustaining her convictions seems daunting, especially given the demands of school, sports, and social life. Martha knows she can't do this by herself. She needs companions—trusted adults as well as teens—to continue the journey with her and hold her accountable. She suspects and hopes that the church might offer such support.

Exploring Practices in Context

Way to Live shares reflections on what teen-adult teams discovered as together we explored Christian practices. Note first the emphasis on seeking local knowledge. Readers may be inspired, for instance, by

what WTL authors have to say about the practice of "managing our stuff." Yet our formation as Jesus' disciples always occurs in specific times and places. So "managing our stuff" will take a different shape and prompt a different call to discipleship in urban Los Angeles than in rural Iowa. *Way to Live* resources challenge youth and adults to go out and explore practices for themselves in their own local settings.

On the other hand, some features of "managing our stuff" will be similar across contexts. Consider how Christians throughout history have struggled mightily to be faithful stewards of their material resources, and how their efforts might help us resist the worst impulses of global consumer culture. Young people today don't have to reinvent the wheel or figure out how to do this from scratch. They can seek wisdom as embodied in the life and witness of forbearers such as third-century teenager Anthony of Egypt or thirteenth-century young adult Francis of Assisi. In the company of wise adults, they can learn from contemporary faith communities that share a rule of life how to manage and regard their material possessions.⁸

Household Wisdom

Young people yearn for trustworthy guidance in living wisely. Now and then they may act like rebels without a cause for the sheer sake of bucking authority. But most of the time young people crave sustained, meaningful relationships with adults who will care for them and nurture their hopes and dreams. This is a second and crucial emphasis of *Way to Live*: adults and teens grow in faith as we share life together. A group of teens led by one or two adults can explore the practice of "managing our stuff" up to a point. But engaging in this practice with an equal number of youth and adults makes for deeper exploration; it makes transparent to youth how adults discern their own participation in this practice. Why is this so?

Adults typically determine the rules for how household stuff is managed. Gospel wisdom addresses both explicit and implicit rules governing the full range of household activities, from sharing food to exchanging gifts to caring for clothes. Teens and their parents can grow in faith together as they practice good stewardship in managing their stuff. They can acknowledge the household as a pivotal locus for lifelong spiritual formation.

The importance of the parental household is corroborated by a key finding of the recent National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR): teens identify their parents as the single most significant influence

in their religious and spiritual lives.⁹ While parents look to the parish to teach their young, teens look to their parents for cues about a life of faith.¹⁰ Most teen respondents characterized themselves as religious even though they don't think practicing religion requires belonging to a local faith community. Religious teens appreciate parish life, and seventy-five percent of those who do attend worship services find them "warm and welcoming." Yet even churchgoing teens believe faith is more a matter of personal choice than communal affiliation.¹¹

Sound familiar? Religious teens are highly conventional in their beliefs—conventional in that their worldviews correspond to the worldviews of their parents. This allegiance to parental worldview lasts at least through the first year of college.¹² Few teens described themselves as "spiritual seekers" or "spiritual but not religious." What teens reported in the NSYR surveys and interviews by and large reflects what their parents believe. Again, this study underscores the vital importance of youth and adults—especially parents—growing in faith together. Today the most effective approaches to ministry with youth build-on youth-adult partnership rather than age segregation.

In the ten years since its publication, *The Godbearing Life* has sparked renewal for many youth leaders by emphasizing the spiritual formation adults need as they minister with youth. Adults often feel inadequate and self-conscious about their lack of biblical and theological knowledge. What teens need from adults, claim co-authors Kenda Dean and Ron Foster, is not more information. What they need is to know what and whom adults love. When youth leaders convey that they love God, and invite youth to join them in loving God, teens will go in search of whatever additional information they need. When we love someone that's what we do; we find out all we can about that person.

In *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli summons the entire congregation or parish to pay careful attention to young people in order to serve with them in ministry. Yaconelli counsels adult leaders to resist the latest youth ministry fads and program ideas. Instead, classic contemplative disciplines of prayer and meditating on Scripture open the eyes and ears of adults to discern what God is calling them to do with young people in their care—not just parish youth but every young person who might be considered a neighbor to the parish.

From Program to Practice

In many North American congregational religious education is chiefly driven by *program management*. The professional church educator, including the youth minister, is viewed as a program director or coordinator of parish programs. "A program is a list of events to be performed, a plan of activities to be accomplished" (Foster, 29). The program paradigm appeals to our desire to organize, schedule, compartmentalize, and offer a range of choices for consumption in the religious marketplace. "Program options emphasize personal choice, often without criteria to assess the relative value of the options offered" (Foster 29). The monthly church calendar shows meetings and events, typically clustered on Sundays and perhaps Wednesdays or other weekdays. Sometimes this calendar is shaped by rhythms of the liturgical year; more often it is shaped by school and vacation schedules as well.

In some churches, leaders are promoting a shift from program to practice. Rather than viewing parish life as a series of episodic and disconnected events, church educators and youth ministers are guided by an overarching vision of how practices nurture and sustain faith, of how practices anchored in worship flow into the world and throughout daily life.

Maria Harris, a religious educator of blessed memory, described how classic forms of Christian communal life—*kerygma*, *didache*, *diakonia*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*—provide a framework for faithful ministry with youth. Harris redefines these early church terms in relation to contemporary teenagers. For instance, she describes *kerygma* as "the ministry of advocacy" and *diakonia* as "the ministry of troublemaking." *Portrait of Youth Ministry* is still as relevant for prophetic, life-giving youth ministry today as it was when Harris penned it almost three decades ago.

In *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry*, William Myers presents contrasting portraits of two Protestant youth ministries. St. Andrew's Church is an affluent, mostly white Presbyterian congregation in suburban St. Louis. Grace Church is a large, black, south-side Chicago congregation affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

At Grace Church the entire congregation assumes leadership for nurturing youth in faith. Every fifth Sunday the youth at Grace Church lead the entire worship service, including the sermon. Grace youth are (explicitly) taught that church is like *family*, and that survival depends on cooperation and mutual aid. For young people at Grace, the goal is to become

competent adults by resisting forces within the dominant culture.

At St. Andrew's Church, youth are provided programs directed by designated youth leaders. St. Andrew's (implicitly) teaches that church is like a *corporation*, and that success comes to those who compete well as rugged individualists. Youth are taught to become competent managers by learning to adapt to the dominant culture.

Myers's comparison of St. Andrew's and Grace shows what's at stake in the paradigm shift from program to practice. The contrast prompts questions as we evaluate our current youth ministry: What explicit and implicit formation goals does our parish hold for young people? Are these goals more akin to those of Grace Church or to those of St. Andrew's? What would it take for our youth ministry to become more courageous, more challenging, to adopt an alternative way of life?

Honoring the Body

Grace Church proclaims itself "unapologetically black and unashamedly Christian." The story of African slavery in the Americas is a story of people struggling to maintain human dignity in the face of massive oppression and humiliation. Slavery also perpetuates dishonoring the body through internalized shame and oppression. The antidote to this legacy of self-loathing is a healthy sense of pride and the practice of honoring the body. To honor the body is to respect the sacred vulnerability of oneself and others, to see every body as created in the image of God.

The Valparaiso Project describes faith practices as "embodied wisdom," to distinguish our approach from "spiritual practices" that ignore the body. Young people, especially youth of color, harbor the suspicion that Christianity is more concerned about saving their souls for the world to come than redeeming them *body and soul* for life in this world. Youth need more than well-intended slogans such as "just say no" or "true love waits." They need a capacious practice of honoring the body grounded in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, bolstered by theological scaffolding provided by Paul's insistence that human bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit," beloved by our Creator (see 1 Corinthians 6:12–20).

Sharing life at table is a palpable practice for honoring the body. Food plays a pivotal role in founding stories of Judaism and Christianity; indeed, the Church began as meal fellowship. In my home congregation we have Sunday dinner each week following worship. Parishioners come from

throughout metropolitan Atlanta, so breaking bread together provides time and space to reconnect. Some teens dine with their friends while others sit with their families—perhaps a rare occasion given their weekly schedules. College students and single young adults are grateful for this food and fellowship opportunity. It's the best meal in town for five dollars! People who live on the streets find their way to the buffet line and appreciate the warm meal and words of welcome. Every Sunday young people witness these gestures of ecclesial hospitality and learn how they too can be more involved in this graceful activity.

Several congregations have made table fellowship the centerpiece of their ministry with youth. Matt Smith drew on insights from *Way to Live* to develop a model of youth ministry called *Grace Café* for United Methodist congregations in Davis and Sacramento, California. Supplied by local sustainable food producers, youth prepare weekly meals for themselves and various guests—some nights for presenters and some nights for street people.

Tina McCormick is associate pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Westfield, New Jersey. Tina coordinates Agape Community Kitchen, an outreach ministry that prepares and serves a nutritious meal every Wednesday night to 250 people in the nearby town of Elizabeth. Young people started and continue to lead this soup kitchen ministry, which also provides a clothing closet where guests can receive blankets, clothes, and shoes. Even teens and adults who aren't Presbyterian participate weekly, drawn into an activity that feels worthwhile, that matters, and that makes a difference in the world. What began as a hands-on service opportunity has become a weekly, way-of-life priority that, over time, forms participants in practices of offering hospitality, breaking bread, and seeking justice. Gospel stories and images emerge organically as youth and teens stir chili, wash dishes, and listen to the testimony of guests. As Tina says, "Our hope is to spread God's love and grace, create community with our neighbors in Elizabeth, and develop in our youth and adult volunteers a lifelong commitment to mission work."

From Disciples to Apostles

Rodger Nishioka, a longtime teacher in youth and young adult ministry, recounts a conversation with Suzanne, a thirty-year-old aeronautical engineer who wondered what God was calling her to do with her life. Suzanne recalled going on a mission trip during her high school years, where she felt fully alive

teaching the kids of migrant farm families in central Washington. Nishioka observes that over the course of those days, the young people on that mission trip “were not being *entertained* by high-powered glitzy presentations or *protected* from the world or focused internally on *fellowship* with each other or experiencing the *maintenance* of a holding pattern until they were ready for ministry. In those days, these young people were being the church. They were being *disciples* of Jesus, and Suzanne had recognized and claimed those days as a touchstone of significance and meaning in her life of faith.” (Nishioka, 25)

Suzanne and her mission team companions were also being formed as Jesus’ *apostles*, or sent ones. From its conception the holy catholic church was being sent even as it was being gathered. Jesus called disciples and sent them out two by two to minister in his name, even before they grasped the full scope of his mission (Mark 6). In his parting words before ascending into heaven, Jesus commissioned his band of followers into God’s larger mission activity: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Mission is not an optional or exceptional aspect of the church; being sent is as constitutive an activity of the church as congregating.

At its best, the modern short-term mission trip can be viewed as evidence of ecclesial vitality, a recovery of the church’s apostolic calling. Mission trips can also be faith-centering experiences for the millions of teens and young adults who annually embark on them.¹³ And youth leaders find that they have more contact hours with their group on a mission trip than during the other weeks of the year combined.

In *Mission Trips That Matter*, I claim that mission team members (youth and adults) often return home experience-rich yet reflection-poor. Our temptation is simply to consume the experience, for North American culture teaches us to consume things and to define our worth by what and how much we consume. If we are going to invest considerable time, talent, and treasure in planning and leading a mission trip, we need to mine the experiences that occur on such outreach ventures. The more our hearts and minds are shaped by biblical and liturgical imagination, the more connections we notice as the larger story of our mission trip unfolds.

What we learn on mission trips is that we do not presume to bring Christ to others. Rather, as we literally walk with another and accompany that person in faith, we both encounter Christ joining us

on our way, often unexpectedly.¹⁴ The best framework for mission trips is ongoing reciprocal partnership so that everyone gets a chance to serve and to be served, as befits Christian hospitality. Cultivating a culture of mission doesn’t just mean sending folks out; it also means receiving mission teams. Every parish building ought to have a shower to accommodate overnight guests. Youth will enjoy hosting mission teams from other communities. Visiting teams can help us see mission opportunities we’ve missed right in our own backyards.¹⁵

New Monasticism for Young Adults

Young adults are acutely aware that Christian faith ought to shape a way of life. Drawing on wisdom as ancient as the Rule of Benedict and inspired by the witness of Catholic Worker Houses and programs such as the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings are establishing intentional Christian communities around the country, often by taking up residence in “the abandoned places of empire.” This ecumenical movement is organized under the banner The New Monasticism Project, chartered by publications such as *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*.

Disciplines of grace are revealed as young adults share a life together shaped by *ora et labora et scriptura* (prayer, work, and Scripture). They attempt to resist the fragmentation of life by integrating the daily work of farming, cooking, and cleaning with disciplines of prayer, studying Scripture, feasting, and fasting. Houses typically include celibate singles and monogamous married couples and their children. Many locate in large urban centers, where power and powerlessness intersect, and go by names such as Sojourners Community, The Simple Way, The Open Door, Mercy Street, Reba Place Fellowship, Jonah House, Camden House, and Rutba House.

Anathoth Community Garden is an outreach ministry of Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, a rural congregation in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Participants in this ministry do not share a household; rather they share a commitment to the practice of gardening on a cultivated plot of land. Anathoth daily demonstrates fidelity to place, sustainable agriculture, care for creation, and Christ’s ministry of reconciliation across racial, economic, and political lines. Young adults, seminarians, and college summer interns are enthusiastic supporters of Anathoth, and a prophetic

teaching ministry has sprouted from the good seed of this garden.¹⁶

Not every young adult can join an intentional residential community or plant a community garden. But parishes can actively sponsor local initiatives that embody Christian faith as a challenging and worthy adventure. Parishes can also recruit and send out young adults in mission for the sake of the world. University Presbyterian Church in Seattle has been sending out college students on summer missions for fifty-three years. To date, over 1,000 students have participated in the World Deputation program, serving in over forty foreign countries and twenty states in the U.S. This congregation leads the Presbyterian Church (USA) in calling young adults into ordained ministry. It offers an instructive lesson for all parishes and communions that seek to nurture leaders for lifelong faith formation and service in the church.

Hopeful Practices

Ministry that encourages disciples to discern their *vocation*—their life calling—can liberate teenagers and young adults to be the persons God calls them to be. Cultural scripts and socially defined roles must still be negotiated, but young disciples can be set free within the context of these scripts and roles to fashion their own personhood as followers of Jesus. The way of life God sets before us will not be scripted except by the liberating word of Scripture as interpreted by communities of practice, accountability, and care. These communities practice their faith as improvisational theater, with Jesus onstage as a companion actor. Youthful actors contribute their distinctive charisms of power and passion as they practice their faith, performing the gospel in the world.

Christian practices require improvisation and adaptation in every age, by every successive troupe of actors. Those who gain skill and confidence in the practices also experience them as *means of grace* by which God sustains us throughout our earthly pilgrimage. Young persons are eager to apprentice themselves to mature practitioners, and we have emphasized how crucial it is for adults to collaborate with youth and young adults as together they grow in faith.

We want young people to seek out strong faith communities wherever they venture in this world. Yet we adults need this confidence and this resilient faith in our own lives. So all the while we're building that "field of dreams" for the sake of others, in the end we realize that we're building it for our own sakes—and our own redemption as well.¹⁷

End Notes

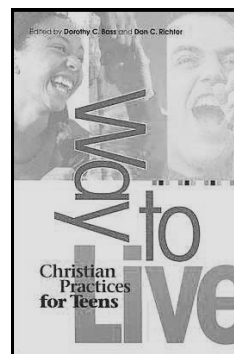
- ¹ Kenda Creasy Dean presents the most thorough discussion of passion in relation to youth and the life of faith in *Practicing Passion* (Eerdmans, 2004).
- ² Political movements in which young people played a pivotal role include the Hitler Youth (fascism), the Khmer Rouge (communism), and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (democratic reform).
- ³ David White provides a concise overview of the social construction of adolescence in "The Vocation of Youth...As Youth," *Insights*, Vol. 123, No. 2, Spring 2008, 3-12.
- ⁴ Demographers group the Echo Boom generation as the age cohort born between 1980-2000, offspring of the Baby Boom generation born between 1946-1964.
- ⁵ Eboo Patel, founding director of the Interfaith Youth Corps, describes his youth ministry as a life-giving alternative to al-Qaeda in *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Beacon Press, 2007).
- ⁶ In our work we define Christian practices as "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God's grace to all creation through Christ Jesus." For more background on this approach see www.practicingourfaith.org
- ⁷ *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter (Upper Room Books, 2002). Youth leaders report that the WTL Leader's Guide is an invaluable resource for suggested learning activities exploring Christian practices. For a free downloadable guide see www.waytolive.org. Note that this website is not simply an online reproduction of the book but is itself an engagement with Christian practices by a group of teens in an actual high school setting.
- ⁸ See *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, by Christine Pohl (Eerdmans, 1999).
- ⁹ See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton (Oxford University Press, 2005), 261.
- ¹⁰ Divorce poses a formidable challenge as the fractured parental household disrupts the continuity of everyday practices for teens. Teens must often fend for themselves in sustaining practices in the midst of chaos. See Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (Crown, 2005).
- ¹¹ See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, 72-81.

- ¹² Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- ¹³ See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, 53-54.
- ¹⁴ The Emmaus Road story in Luke 24 portrays how Christ accompanies disciples on the road as they are walking together.
- ¹⁵ The Christian Vision Project, in cooperation with *Christianity Today*, has filmed a documentary on “round trip missions” that features a mission team from Chapel Hill, North Carolina partnering with a mission team from Nairobi, Kenya. The film and companion curriculum will be published in October 2008.
- ¹⁶ Fred Bahnson, master gardener and resident theologian, has published essays grounded in the experience of Anathoth Garden. “Compost for the Kingdom” appeared in the September 5, 2006 issue of *The Christian Century*. “The Field at Anathoth: How a Garden Becomes a Protest” appeared in the July/August 2007 issue of *Orion Magazine*. “The Salvation of the City: Defiant Gardens in the Great Northern Feedlot” is a chapter Fred contributed to *Places of God: Theological Conversations with Wendell Berry*, edited by Joel Shuman (University of Kentucky Press, 2007).
- ¹⁷ This is the lesson Ray Kinsella learns in the film *Field of Dreams* when he builds a baseball field on his Iowa farm. At first he’s convinced the field is for Shoeless Joe Jackson and the Chicago White Sox players who were banned for throwing the 1919 World Series. Later it is revealed to Ray that the field is for his own healing as well.

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Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens

Dorothy Bass and Don
Richter, editors.

(Nashville: Upper Room
Books, 2002)

Written for teens by teens and adults, Way to Live presents eighteen ancient Christian practices that provide ways for young people to deepen their awareness of God in their lives and in the world, and practice their faith in daily life. The eighteen practices include: The Story, Bodies, Stuff, Food, Creation, Creativity, Work, Play, Time, Truth, Choices, Friends, Welcome, Forgiveness, Justice, Grieving, Music, and Prayer. A free study guide is available from: www.waytolive.org.

Like its parent book Practicing Our Faith, this book advocates a set of Christian practices that are crucial to human well-being and that, together, shape a life well lived. Reflecting on and growing stronger in such practices, teens encounter the possibility of a more faithful way of life, one that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom. To deepen their insights and ground their images, adult authors partnered with teenaged colleagues throughout the planning and writing of Way to Live.

www.waytolive.org



A “Community of Communities” Approach to Youth Ministry

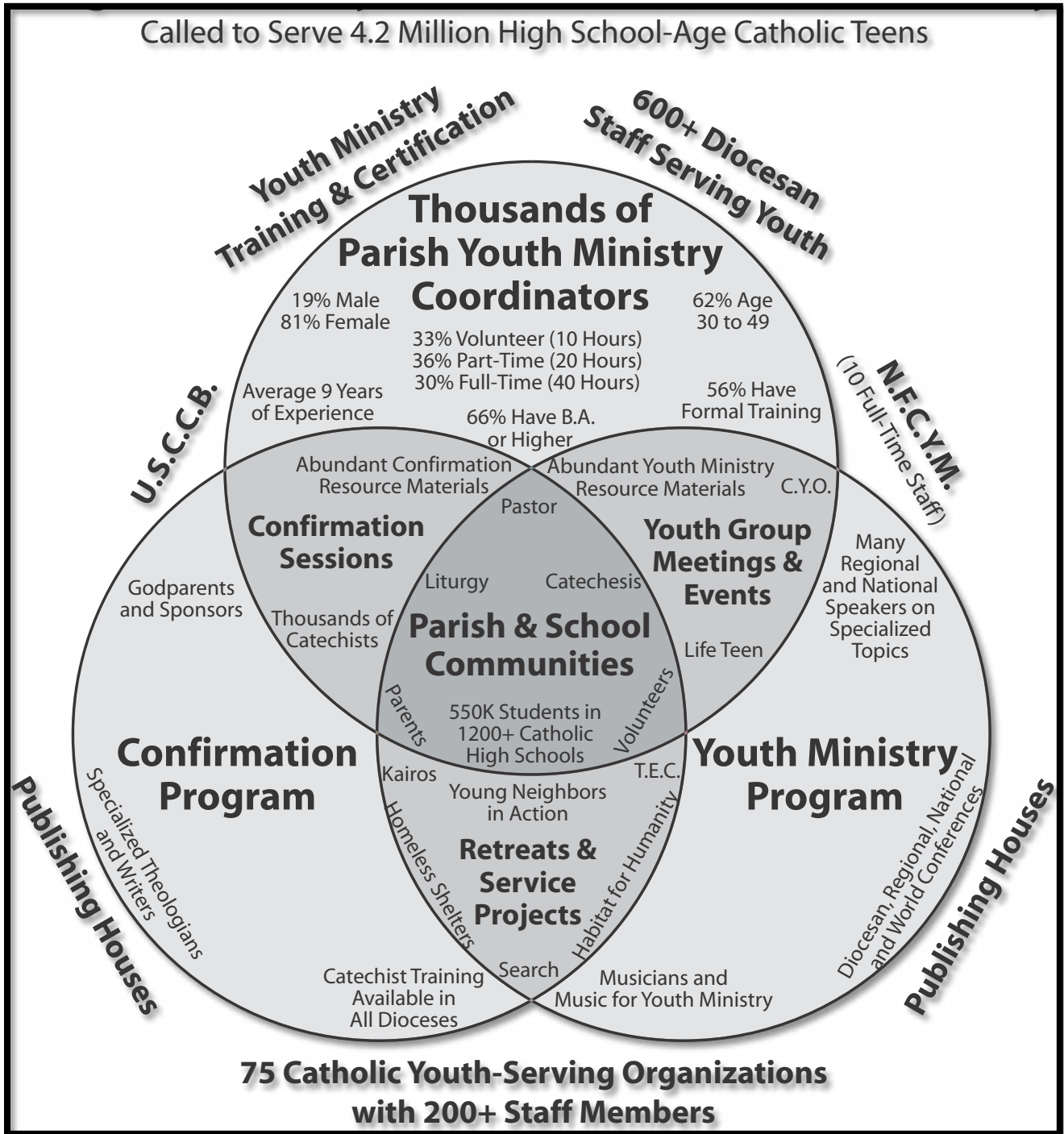
Ken Johnson-Mondragon with Ed Lozano

In 2005, when the National Study of Youth and Religion published *Soul Searching*, for the first time it became possible to measure the reach of Catholic youth ministry in a scientific way. Many pastors and youth ministers were disconcerted to find that only 24% of Catholic youth were participating in parish youth groups—far short of the 52% average among Protestant teens and 72% in Mormon communities (Smith and Donovan, 51). It is undoubtedly true that the renewal of Catholic youth ministry in the last 40 years has produced a rich ecosystem of parish youth ministry leaders and catechists, formation programs, practical resources, Confirmation programs, support services, ecclesial movements, and specialized, dynamic speakers for diocesan, regional and national events (Diagram 1). Nevertheless, one must ask the question: regardless of how many components are integrated into our programming, can we really call our youth ministries “comprehensive” if they are leaving 76% of our Catholic adolescents unserved?

In some ways, the low level of participation among Catholic youth should come as no surprise. There are currently 17,644 parishes in the United States,¹ called to serve a population of about 4.2 million high school-age teens who identify themselves as Catholic.² That means the *average* parish has about 240 Catholic adolescents living within its boundaries. In California, the parishes are even larger, with the average parish called to serve 1,000 youth and some very large parishes having as many as 3,000 Catholic adolescents—yet most youth ministers are delighted if they are reaching between 50 and 80 high school students each year. Simply put, few parish youth ministries are structured in a way that would make it feasible to involve even half of their parish’s adolescent members.

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Diagram 1: Ecosystem of Catholic Youth Ministry



The “Community of Communities” Approach

This is where a “community of communities” approach can expand the reach of the parish’s youth ministry over time. Pope John Paul II said that when the parish is seen as a community of communities and movements, it becomes “possible to live communion more intensely... In such a human context, it will be easier to gather to hear the word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this word, and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ.” Similarly, the inadequacy of trying to gather a large and diverse youth community into one youth group was highlighted at the First National Encounter for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry:

The leaders in *Pastoral Juvenil*, Hispanic ministry, and mainstream youth and young adult ministry are increasingly aware that the programs and activities of the mainstream culture do not attract the full participation of Hispanic adolescents and *jóvenes*, even though they may speak English. This occurs due to economic, cultural, educational, geographic, and linguistic differences between the young people, especially when the parish ministry is limited to a single youth group. (33)

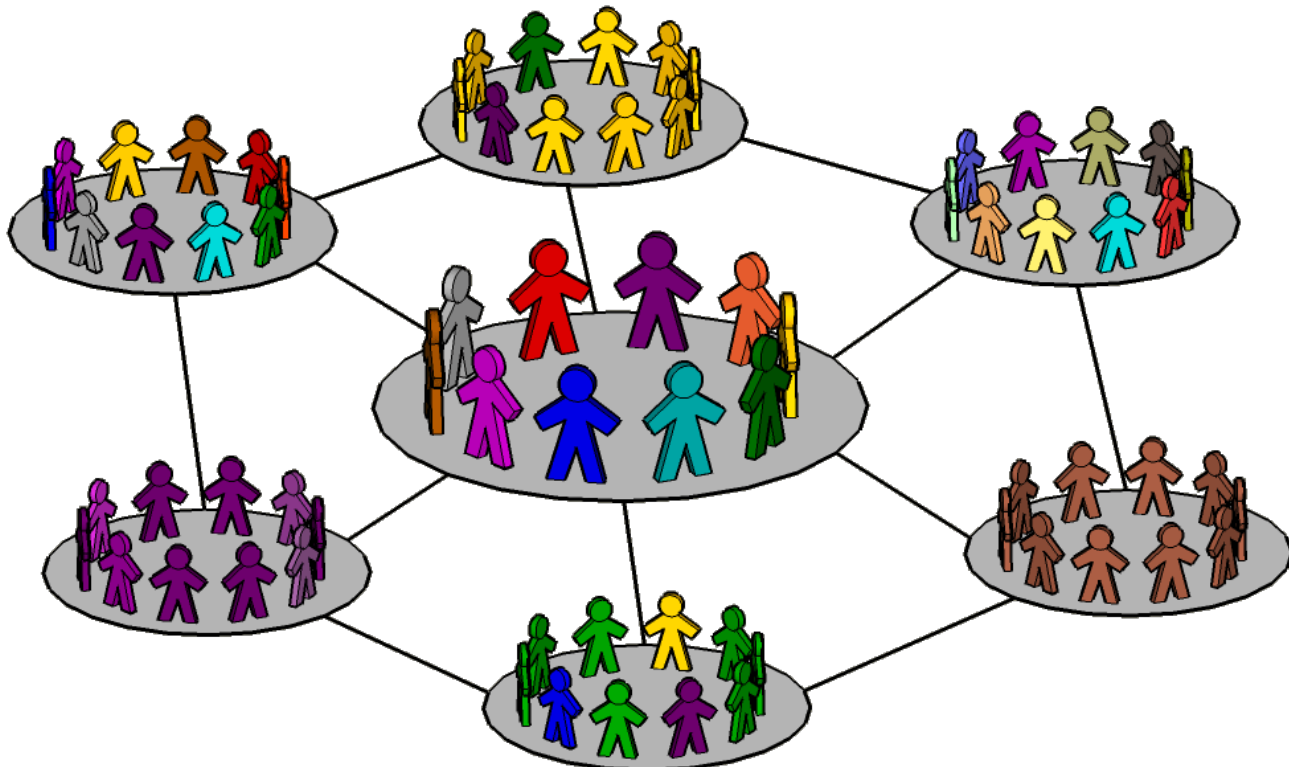
In a community of communities approach, the paid or designated volunteer youth ministry leader (YML) in the parish chairs a core team that consists of adult coordinators and key youth leaders who oversee each of the youth ministries or small communities. This approach is very helpful in linguistically diverse youth communities, as it affords the opportunity for young people to gather in a peer group in which they share a common language and socio-cultural experience. In other words, it lowers the social barriers to

entry into the parish youth ministry for young people who may feel different, isolated, or marginalized for any reason. At the same time, it provides multiple opportunities for teens to get involved in the parish throughout the week—which is great for families and young people with busy schedules.

In this model, the responsibilities of the YML and the core team are: to do pastoral planning for the whole youth community; to uphold the vision of youth ministry in all of the programs, ministries, and events; to provide leadership training and access to formation for coordinators and their teams of adult and adolescent leaders; and to collaborate on occasional events and activities for the whole parish youth community. The YML may also serve as the actual coordinator for one or more of the small communities or ministries, especially when the community of communities approach is getting started. Eventually the YML should hand off established ministries to volunteer coordinators in order to start new ministries that respond to local pastoral needs.

Diagram 2 illustrates this concept, with the core team in the middle and the various groups and communities extending out from the center—some more culturally diverse than others, depending on the language and pastoral needs addressed in each community. It is important to note that the various ministries and programs are not isolated from one another. Rather, they share a common vision, a common mission, and a common pastoral plan. In addition, they directly relate to and collaborate with one another on occasion, and they all provide a vehicle for young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, to grow in Christian maturity, and to insert themselves into the life, mission, and work of the Eucharistic community of communities, which is the parish.

Diagram 2: Youth Ministry in a Community of Communities



A Case Study: St. Matthew Catholic Church in Arlington, TX

In 1996, Ed Lozano was a volunteer Confirmation catechist, teaching a group of 12 high school students at his mostly-Hispanic parish in Arlington, TX—with no budget. About half way through the year, the young people in his group started to ask for more, indicating that they wanted a youth group to continue after Confirmation. By the next year, Ed had contacted the diocesan office of youth ministry in Fort Worth and received a basic certification in youth ministry. He immediately grasped the rich potential of a comprehensive model that included the eight components of Catholic youth ministry presented in *Renewing the Vision*, and began

to incorporate all eight into his work with the teens.

The next year Ed submitted a proposal to the pastor asking for a budget of \$16,000 to implement a comprehensive model of youth ministry. On his way to the finance council meeting, the pastor called Ed over and asked him, “Do you know that you are asking for an 800% increase in the amount of money we spend for teens?” Ed replied, “Father, you’ve had \$2,000 in the budget for the last eight years, and you’ve used none of it; I’m just asking for that money back”—and the request was approved. Once he came on staff in 1998, the first thing Ed did was to ask the parish office for a print-out of all the registered adolescents in the parish, ages 12 to 18; there were about 1,500 kids.

Ed recognized from the start that prayer and worship would be key to the success of his ministry. So in addition to the variety of musical and prayer experiences he was incorporating into regular sessions, he

organized an Ash Wednesday celebration of the Word conducted entirely by the teens as a ministry to their peers. He also initiated a Triduum retreat for young people that engaged them in an experience of the Paschal Mystery in a way that relates to contemporary life. Both events continue to this day and are immensely popular among the young people.

Similarly, leadership development has played a critical role in St. Matthew's accomplishments. In 2000, a group of teens from the parish attended the Center for Ministry Development's YouthLeader program³ and began to exercise leadership among their peers in multiple ways. Parents and other adults in the community also stepped forward for training and to participate in the ministry. The community of communities model simply does not work if the parish expects the paid YML to do everything and be everything for the young people—it is only when the whole parish community takes responsibility for the ministry that it is possible to increase the scale of programming to its full potential.

The youth ministry at St. Matthew started with sacramental preparation, and a broad understanding of catechesis and faith formation continues to be at the heart of the work that is done there. Today, St. Matthew provides First Communion preparation to about 200 junior high students each year (grades 6 to 8) who did not receive the sacrament at an earlier age. They are formed into groups of about 15 students with two adult catechists assigned to each, and at the end of their weekly Saturday morning sessions, they all come together for a large group prayer and worship experience that builds on the catechetical theme of the week. An additional 50 junior high students and about 60 ninth-graders are also receiving faith formation each week, although they are not preparing for any sacrament per se.

Because St. Matthew provides continuous opportunities for faith formation at every grade, a significant part of the 150 high school-age students attending Confirmation

classes (10th grade) come in with a basic or better knowledge of the faith and an honest desire to grow in relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church. This has radically changed the spirit and culture of the Confirmation sessions, with young people taking the lead and setting the tone for the evangelization of their peers—many of whose families do not come to church regularly. In support of the Confirmation classes, faith formation is provided to parents in a series of four parent sessions, and monthly pot-lucks provide an opportunity for families to build community and share pointers for parenting adolescents.

Around 2000, Ed began going alternately to the Mexican American Cultural Center (now the Mexican American Catholic College⁴) and Instituto Fe y Vida's Summer Program⁵ every year. He knew that he needed to strengthen his pastoral vocabulary in Spanish and improve his outreach, especially to the immigrant youth, and these trainings provided a means to do that. Since 1998 Ed has been advising a *grupo juvenil* (peer ministry group of Spanish-speaking single young adults) called *Juntos con Jesús*. The group continues to this day with about 50 to 60 members, many of whom have also participated in Fe y Vida's training to enhance their leadership in this ministry to and with their peers, utilizing a variety of resources from Fe y Vida.

In 2002, the diocese invited St. Mary's Press to give a presentation on a new initiative called *Youth Engaging Scripture*. Ed participated in the training and soon grasped that *lectio divina* in the form of weekly reflection on the Sunday Scripture readings could enhance both faith formation and prayer and worship while building community among the young people. About that time he noticed that there were a number of teens wandering the parish halls on Thursday nights while the *grupo de oración* (a prayer group for about 300 adults in Spanish) was taking place. So he opened the doors to a teen Scripture study group,

which has evolved into four bilingual classrooms of junior high students and a pair of high school groups (mostly 9th graders), with about 15 youth in each class.

In 2004, Ed was approached by a group of four mothers who had recently immigrated from Mexico, and whose grade school-aged children were failing in school. He began to tutor them and was delighted to see their grades improving and their interest in school increasing. Ed recognized the need for advocacy on behalf of families in the public school system—especially when the parents do not speak English. He also saw the need for ongoing tutoring, so he contacted a local United Methodist ministry called Hope Tutoring⁶ and asked them if they would open a branch at St. Matthew. They did, and to this day tutoring has been incorporated into the pastoral care provided by the parish, and some of the parish youth participate as tutors for younger students as a form of service.

For many years, the parish *Quinceañera* program consisted of a several two-hour faith development sessions led by one of the deacons and his wife. Around 2005, Ed was doing some work on integrating an asset-building approach (Roehlkepartain, et al.) into his youth ministry, and he saw an opportunity to enrich the preparation of the girls and their families with a holistic developmental strategy that would complement the faith formation elements. Today, the program consists of five 4-hour sessions with the girls and their parents, in which the *quinceañeras* are given skills to be successful as teenagers and the parents receive tools to improve their relationship with their daughters and insights about how to guide them through adolescence. A team of young adult Latinas who have gone through the program now serve as presenters for this ministry.

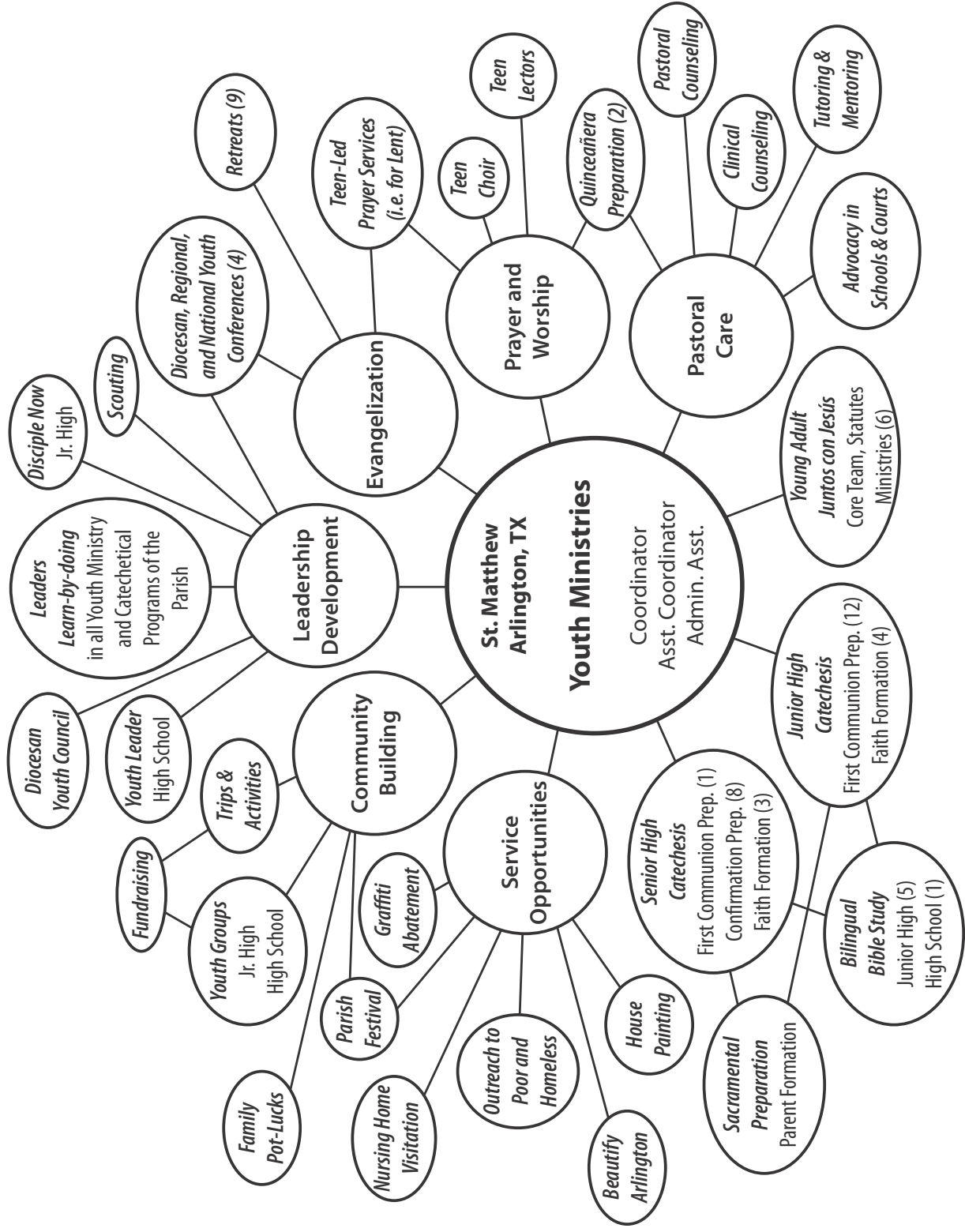
Much more could be written about the integration of the eight components in ministry at St. Matthew, but this is enough to give a sense of the approach and the process that has allowed youth ministry to flourish

there. In the 2012-2013 school year, Ed estimates that St. Matthew will serve a little more than 900 young people in the parish, with about 110 adult volunteers and more than 100 teen leaders contributing in some way to the 20+ programs and 50+ groups or classes in the various youth ministries. He describes this system as a comprehensive ministry that uses all eight components to reach out to the whole youth community of the parish, with many options for young people to connect and find their place. The parish now has a budget for a full-time youth minister, a part time assistant, and a part-time secretary. Clearly, this ministry did not develop overnight, but it is a wonderful example of what is possible when a comprehensive vision of youth ministry is implemented with a community of communities approach. Diagram 3 provides an organizational chart of St. Matthew's youth ministry as it stands today, with the number of groups, classes, or events in parentheses when applicable.

End Notes

- ¹ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html> (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ² Ken Johnson-Mondragón, "Catholic Youth and Young Adults in 2012," www.feyvida.org/research/catholic-youth-and-young-adults/ (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ³ See www.cmdnet.org/youth-ministry/youth-leader/program-overview (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ⁴ See www.maccsa.org (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ⁵ See www.feyvida.org/programs/summer.html (accessed March 15, 2013).
- ⁶ See www.hopetutoring.com/ (accessed March 15, 2013).

Diagram 3: Youth Ministry Programming at St. Matthew Catholic Church



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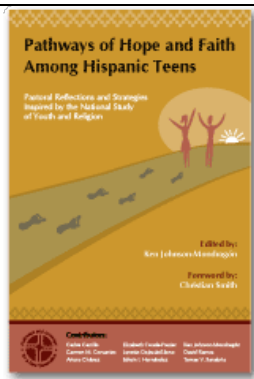
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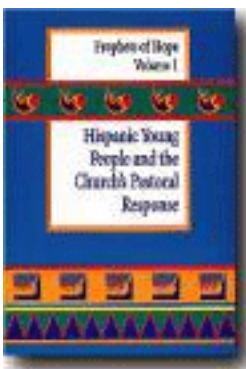
Resources from Instituto Fe y Vida



Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens: Pastoral Reflections and Strategies Inspired by the National Study of Youth and Religion

Edited by Ken Johnson-Mondragón (Stockton: Instituto Fe y Vida)

Building on the largest national survey of teenage religion ever conducted, leading Catholic and Protestant experts recount in unprecedented detail the experiences of God, faith, community, youth ministry, and family among the fastest-growing segment of young people in the country—Latinos. Listen as young Hispanics describe their faith and hopes in their own words; gain understanding of the major issues affecting their religious development and life prospects; and improve your ministry or family life with insightful pastoral recommendations.



Witness of Hope Collection

Instituto Fe y Vida (www.feyvida.org/publications/witnesses.html)

The *Witnesses of Hope* collection, eight books organized into three series, lends strong support to ministry with Hispanic jóvenes (single young adults ages sixteen to thirty) by offering specialized resources for the development of small faith communities according to the *Prophets of Hope* Model. The model assumes and implements the goal of the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry to help Hispanic jóvenes to live and promote by means of a Pastoral de Conjunto a model of church that is: 1) communitarian, evangelizing, and missionary; 2) incarnate in the reality of the Hispanic people and open to the diversity of cultures; 3) a promoter and example of justice; 4) active in developing leadership by holistic education; and 5) leaven for the Kingdom of God in society.



The “Identity Crisis” of the Youth Minister

Lee Yates

I am living through an identity crisis. For many years I was a Youth Director or Youth Minister. It was a job title that I took pride in. Even after ordination, I was comfortable with the “less than real ministry” looks I got. I was comfortable with being lumped in with the untrained youth leaders on staff at other congregations. We shared a similar calling to serve young people and that was all that mattered. Now, I’ve come to a point where the title of “youth minister” gets my brain spinning. Frustration and well-rehearsed lectures swirl through my mind. It is amazing how I’ve come to see a ministry title, which was once important to me, as a detriment to the Church. Of all the words the Church has tried to make taboo (witness, testimony, sex, tithe, etc.), the one we should really start washing out mouths out with soap over is “Youth Minister.”

My critique of the title, “Youth Minister,” is different from many pastors who started out in educational ministry but saw themselves as moving “up” to different roles in the Church. While I never felt the need to prove I was “a real minister,” I can see the derogatory perspective of these pastors has shaped our current reality and makes the issue worth a moment of reflection. As the

Lee Yates worked for 15 years in congregational ministry. He is now devoting himself to writing, resourcing and consulting. Lee has done everything from resourcing small congregations and directing national youth events. Along the way he has developed a variety of educational resources including, *Joining the Story*, a chronological study of the Old Testament. Lee has written for the United Church of Christ's *Faith Practices*, the National Council of Churches' *New Earth* camp curriculum, and is a regular contributor to *[D]mergent.org*. He was also part of the design team for Eastern Mennonite University's Y-STAR (Youth and Trauma) curriculum. Lee spends much of his summer leading hands on mission events and keynoting church camps.

son of a Christian educator, I've heard snide comments that reflect this promotion mentality of ministry since I was a child. Terms such as, "real ministry" or "more mature calling" slipped out of pastors' mouths as they would casually described their new positions. The more self-aware of the bunch would often try to cover their self-aggrandizing comments with an awkward tag on such as, "not that there is anything wrong with working with children or youth." These comments highlighted what was painfully clear in the Church. Ministry with children and youth has always been treated as a lesser calling.

For many pastors, even today, ministry with youth and children is the area of church life where they practiced, as if young people are suitable test subjects. Ministers would make all their mistakes in the "minor leagues" before moving up to a pulpit. Clergy never seemed to understand how much power and influence they hold for these families. What was implicitly communicated to everyone was that the faith of the young was less important than the faith of the adults. It is no wonder so many young people have felt marginalized by the Church and it is no wonder that so many who feel called to serve them drew a line in the sand and professionalized this calling.

Paul Takes Sides

Scripture offers us Paul's letter to Timothy, a young man exploring his call to ministry. Paul's words have been preached in more youth led worship services than I can count. Paul seems to know that Timothy will face push-back as a young person trying to lead. Youth and youth ministers have found comfort and encouragement in this epistle. For a long time, every reading of this text was presented as a justification for youth ministry. Speaking from ancient days, Paul was telling the Church to open up its ears and listen to the voices of young people. Paul challenged youth not to be silent but to speak up and take on a mantle of responsibility. Timothy jumped off the pages of scripture as the mascot of youth empowerment

and the unofficial saint of modern Youth Ministers.

Ironically, many of the sermons I've heard on this text are by youth ministers to the congregations that called them to serve or by youth who have been invited to lead worship. Somehow, there was a disconnect between what was already being offered and what was desired. In many ways, it was "preaching to the choir." In a culture shaped by the civil-rights movement, there was no denying the voice of young people. While the Church does have a way of slowing things down, the voice of young people was getting louder. Unfortunately, within the Church, the voice of youth and advocates of youth used the time they were offered to proclaim the theological importance of their own voice. This "bunker mentality" has been a part of youth ministry as long as I can remember. Those leading seemed to think it was them, the young people, Paul and Timothy, all cramped into a room of the church basement together.

In *The Godbearing Life*, Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster coin the phrase, "One Eared Mickey Mouse" model of youth ministry. They echo the common descriptor of youth being ghettoized in both space and programming, only marginally connected to the full body of the Church. The Church receives well deserved criticism for isolating youth and not involving them in the life of the larger congregation. Still, there is also a critique of isolationist youth and youth leaders who have moved away from the full community of Church in search of independence. Razing flags with 1 Timothy 4 printed on them, youth found themselves, in many ways, more distant from the Church and I can only imagine Paul with his head in his hands, groaning something about being taken out of context.

Paul and Mary

Timothy was not the product of a youth group. There, I said it. Paul didn't start youth groups in Ephesus and Corinth and provide them with a book of games to help those gathered, "break

the ice” before diving into deep conversations about Isaiah and what the prophet would have said about cliques, pagan cults, or peer pressure. Paul was a mentor to Timothy and he was not alone. Timothy was raised by a Jewish mother and was part of a believing community. Paul, and those traveling with him, welcome Timothy into their intergenerational community of leaders. Paul never sent Timothy out as a lone-ranger to learn on the fly. Timothy’s faith was shaped and formed in community before being commissioned and sent out to serve.

Another young person in scripture who is thrust into the spotlight is Mary. Dean and Foster do a wonderful job of explaining Mary’s role as *Theotokos* or “Godbearer.” This is a powerful and very appropriate understanding of the way Christians bare God and Christ to others. It is a beautiful example of a young woman doing extraordinary things. Mary’s story could easily be lifted up, right out of context, as another example of youth empowerment. What we might miss is the role her family played. Mary is immersed in family as she faces the birth of her child. She is joining a new family with Joseph with deep roots in the story of her faith. After the birth of Jesus, Mary and her family are visited by magi or “wise” people who gather around her in a time of fragility.

Scripture was birthed by God through a multigenerational community of faith. The story of God’s people has been passed down from generation to generation, bringing the hearer into relationship with a larger family of faith. To isolate the story and the storytellers from that community, whether it be in a church basement or on a big stage with a band and strobe lights, is to unearth the story from its roots.

Bullpen Ministry

Despite these exegetical realities, the modern shape of youth ministry has grown more isolated and specialized. While this evolution was well intentioned, the outcome has been

detrimental to the Church. In an attempt to give youth a place to be themselves, we limited the diversity of voices that would shape their identity. In an attempt to reach youth on their level, we limited their ability to grow further. Most importantly, in an attempt to provide well trained leaders for our youth, we created youth ministers, which brings us back to my identity crisis.

I remember driving to church, listening to a story on the local sports radio channel. A pitcher, specifically the “closer” who pitches the 9th inning, had gotten hurt. The team was in disarray. They were over half-way through the season, battling for first place, and they had no one on their roster who could “close.” A trade was in the works. At first, it seemed like the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard. What was wrong with all the other professional players that kept them from throwing the ball for the last inning of a game? Then reality sunk in. I was a closer!

While training youth leaders, the Church catered to our culture’s outsourcing mentality and appeased the insecurity of parents who felt ill-equipped to teach faith. Soon, we had a specialization of ministry that resembled the bullpen of a baseball team. A main pitcher of the gospel was called to pastor the Church while specialized staff were brought in to fill specific roles. Among those pitchers was me, the high energy, fast ball throwing expert who would close the deal with our youth in the late innings of adolescence: the Youth Minister. And what happens when the closer can’t pitch or the youth minister leaves? Chaos.

Countless stories can be told of youth who feel they have no one to talk to when the youth minister leaves. Even in congregations where there are highly engaged adult leaders, there is a relational pedestal offered to the youth minister. For those of us in the role, it can be intoxicating. There is something powerful about being needed and young people can be very affirming (or overly dramatic) when emotionally connected. Youth leaders can easily mistake the appreciation of youth for successful faith formation. We get sucked in by our own sense of accomplishment or need to

be needed. Before long, we have claimed our place on the pedestal. Then, when staffing changes, we wonder why many of the young people are not more connected to the Church.

In reality, people hear the words, “Youth Minister” and quickly make assumptions. Some will assume this person is fun. Others will assume this person is disorganized. Others won’t care where this person came from because they are so relieved! Now the congregation has an expert on board who will do this important ministry for the community. Everyone can relax and enjoy the number of youth in worship. Everyone can feel good about the pictures from the youth mission trip being shared on Facebook. Everyone can step back from the youth and make room for the youth minister to do their thing.

Power of Words

I recently took a new ministry position which includes work with youth and camps. In the interview process, I was curious about many details of the job, but the most important thing in my mind was the title. This position was combining some previous job descriptions and related to some established ministry teams. While I really wanted the position, I had promised myself, “I will never accept the title of “Youth Minister” again.” My heart leapt when I was offered the position, including the title, “Minister of Faith Formation.” Finally, I had words for what I was truly called to do.

Guilt fluttered through my thoughts, wondering how my mother, who spent a lifetime in the field of Christian education would respond. I thought about all the late-night soap-boxes I had been on with colleagues about the importance of congregations having a youth minister. I wondered how much grief was I about to get and how much of my own identity was lost. It should have been no surprise that my mother, who pushed intergenerational ministry through her career, thought it really matched where the Church needed to be years ago. It turns out, the only

person really having a hard time letting go of the old youth minister inside me, was me.

Now, I find myself on a new soap-box, ready to wash the words and mentality of “Youth Minister” out of our collective Church consciousness. For some, this isn’t hard. The budget for a youth minister dried up before the language. For others, the number of youth dried up even faster.

Comedian, Tim Wilson once spoke about the “service” guy at a “service station.” Wilson would say to audiences, “Remember that guy that kept bugging you? He would ask about checking your oil. He would ask about checking your washer fluid. Finally you would tell him to go away! And he did. You can’t find anything that resembles service at a station anymore.”

In a similar way, the Church told youth, “You should have your own special things, but somewhere else. You should go do special things, but by yourselves. You should stay out of the grown-up Church.”

And they did!

Youth and children are doing amazing things in our world today, just somewhere else. It’s time for all of us to change our language and try new words. We need to find ways to invite people into life of our Church, not give them excuses to get out. We need to find ways to connect new people across the community of the Church, not isolate the ones who are left. We need to find ways to engage all God’s people in service to the world, not cater to our own needs.

Inviting, connecting, engaging and serving are all words that hold power and can be found on the websites of growing and vibrant congregations. They are all words that call us to be part of something bigger than ourselves. It is time to be one Church rather than loosely connected, psycho-socially appropriately aimed programming circles. One Church, with generations growing together, is much closer to the Church Paul described and served in scripture.

What's Next?

In *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, Mark DeVries gives a history of youth ministry and demonstrates the lack of impact that isolated youth ministry offers. DeVries makes a differentiation between the childhood faith perpetuated by isolated peer groups and the mature faith formed by engagement with different generations. DeVries argues that the shaping of family and participation in an intentional worship community have a much greater impact than any age specific programming.

This is not to say that children and youth should never have time away from adults. Some activities are much better suited to one generation or another. Part of a church community is building friendships with peers who share your faith. The problem is in the isolation of programming. A youth who participates in a Bible study on war and peace can learn and grow in their understanding. A youth who participates in the same study and discusses their thoughts with a grandparent who lived through World War II or a parent who only knew the Cold War as a child, can grow even deeper in their understanding. This is especially true if the conversation is held in the context of prayer.

One congregation I served attempted a mentoring program for all youth. Bruce was a farmer and volunteered to mentor one of the middle school boys. Along with Bruce's assigned youth, came a little brother. The three would walk Bruce's farm and work cattle. They would talk about the way to treat girls on a date and how to engage adults with respect. Bruce was asked to take on some additional leadership in the congregation and regretfully informed me he could not be a mentor the next year. I was disappointed at first, then heard that Bruce and the boys still went for their walks together. It seems, relationships are harder to quit than programs.

Equipping our families to grow together and connecting seekers of all ages with mature Christian families must be a primary goal of

congregations. As a Church, we form a special family beyond the traditional cultural definition. Mentoring, partnering, and accompanying one another will define our congregation's futures more than denominational identity, theology or programming.

The story of God and God's people will continue to be passed down from generation to generation. Faith will be shared through the reading of scripture, proclamation in worship, marches and protests to injustice, service to the poor, and hands clinched tight together in prayer. All these things and more will mark the Church as a people of God. This shared faith will shape all who enter into the community and those who witness God at work in its midst.

I know that I'm not the only one with an identity crisis. For many, bound by fond memories or personal insecurity, breaking away from a program centered model will be difficult. For some, sharing a more connected and intergenerational life will be a challenge. There are models emerging all around us to show how important and how beautiful this change can be. Just, please, don't make this any harder than it already is by naming someone as, "Youth Minister."

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Flipping the Church, Again

Lee Yates

Reverend Terry Ewing once told me that the only thing that happens fast in the Church is trouble. Everything else takes time. Over the years, that has proven to be very true. Change that happens quickly is often knee-jerk or for the wrong reasons. That means, the best changes are better discovered than decided. We look up and realize that things are being done different. The question isn't whether we want to change but rather, our willingness to except the change we have discovered. Those who have spent years helping others discover and claim the way God is moving are very aware of how difficult this process can be. It is even more challenging when it comes to our own discoveries. We are professionals. We have years of experience, technique, and (too often) shtick in our tool box. What are we to do when God turns our vocation upside down?

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Media, Medium, and Story

Epiphany came early to my congregation's after-school program. It was actually the first week of Advent and I was very proud of my lesson plan for the youth. We looked at how each Gospel began, and quickly dissected the typical nativity set. We discussed tradition and defined synopsis. We talked about how stories are told. I was prepared for a great discussion based on all the kids had learned. Instead, I got smacked in the face with indifference. They were not worried about the discrepancies. They quickly got over the lack of biblical evidence for a donkey. The question for them wasn't one of Biblical authority, exegesis, or even exasperation over the donkey going the way of Santa. They took in all that was given and responded with the timeless theological question, "Can we play a game now?" Another updated the question into more modern language, asking "Can I get my tablet out?"

I tried my best to draw them into conversation but failed miserably. So, I went with the flow and found a way for them to play. I gave them Legos to work with and asked them to create a Nativity set out of the blocks. Most jumped in, surprised by the sudden change in plans. A couple of the kids complained and, against my better judgment, I allowed them to get tablets so they wouldn't disrupt the rest of the group.

Those with tablets quickly loaded up their favorite game, Minecraft. For those that don't know, Minecraft uses very simple graphics that look like they were taken straight from the 1980s, and allows players to dig and chop for various resources while building in an open environment where physics don't really apply. I was frustrated that they wouldn't stay engaged with the group, then realized they were playing together. Even though they were on opposite corners of the room, my anti-social whiners were actually connecting through the game. I challenged them to create their own Nativity set on Minecraft and then save it for the group to see.

This is where Epiphany enters. I had worked so hard to show them how others had told the Christmas story, but what they really found joy in was discovering their own version of the story. Instead of asking, "How did the Gospel writers tell the story?" I should have been asking, "How would you tell the Christmas story?" Instead of asking them to be interested in what I found interesting, I should have made room for the Spirit and for the youth to enter the story.

I sat and watched kids swapping blocks for various parts of a manger. They argued about which figures should be used for which characters in their block creation. Others started designing small barns in cyberspace. Those working in different mediums invited others to check out what they were doing. By the end of our time, we had some fun Lego nativity sets. Those working on Minecraft promised to finish during the week and bring back their work to share the next week.

The next gathering was show and tell. Kids had built elaborate nativity scenes in cyberspace. Others were pulling out their phones to take pictures of the previous weeks creations. We had Lego sheep and unicorns. Small figures had been reworked as the holy family. My favorite was the Lego figure of Professor Dumbledore's head on white body with flowing gown of Princess Leah to form a Christmas angel. Then tablets and laptops came out as we saw how many different animals kids could conjure ("spawn" I discovered, was the appropriate term) in Minecraft. Some had built people like statues. Another, inspired by *Vegitales*' cartoons, had inserted giant watermelons to represent the figures.

We quickly moved to the posting of our pictures on Facebook. It wasn't really part of the plan, but it came naturally to the group. We tagged parents in the pictures so they could see what had been done. We shared them in the church's Facebook group, and started noticing some likes from friends at other churches and even some church camp friends and counselors. Some youth ministers I knew had passed on the pictures and invited

their youth to do something similar. The next Sunday in worship, we included some of the pictures in the announcement slides on the big screen.

Can you imagine what would have happened if any of this had been planned? How much further could this project have reached? How many more kids who don't come to our group might have participated by sending in pictures of their creations or a screen-grab of their digital construction? How many families might have read the nativity story together in preparation for a Lego-thon in the living room? How many young people might have heard the Christmas story in a new way, or even for the first time? The limitations were endless, as was the amount I didn't know about expressing faith in a new world. The kids were teaching me and I tried to keep up.

Lent rolled around and we tried a similar project. We read the story together, then invited everyone to go home and create their own version of the story. They would then bring back to the group to share. Amazingly, their response to reading the Scripture was more questions than creativity. We discovered that the Easter story is not as well known in popular culture. With some of our youth being the only church attenders in the family, they had not heard the full story before. We had some great conversations before leaving. Everyone still left with the invitation to create their own version. The next week, some mentioned that they had to look up the Scripture to read it again when they got home. I assumed they meant looking in the family Bible. They meant Google. We started out, just like we had with Advent but the outcome was different. Fascinated by the outcome of our time together, I started evaluating what we were discovering from the youth and how to apply it.

Flipping the Church

The public schools were my next teacher. My son, now in middle school, brings a laptop computer back and forth from school to home

each day. His books and many assignments are found on the computer. Teachers can even answer questions on-line when the kids are away from the classroom. My son's math teacher engages in a practice known to educators as "flipping the classroom." She assigns videos for the kids to watch at home, then has them do the practice problems to go with it at school so she can help them if they struggle or have a peer assist them.

In some ways, this is what we had done at church. We invited people to read the scripture together, then go home and dwell in it. When they came back, we allowed their individual ideas, questions, and sharing to dictate the conversation. The idea of flipping the church seemed to fit where the youth were leading us. Of course, it didn't take long to realize we were not discovering something new. It seemed hauntingly familiar, and as I wrestled with the theological foundation behind it, I realized that we were returning to an earlier style of church. Somehow, over time, church evolved from an experience where everyone brought their gifts to God and gave thanks, to a place you went to receive God's blessing or knowledge.

This is a big change. There is a different mindset in "bringing" verses "receiving." There are elements of both in any church gathering, but the more modern expression has forgotten the importance of affirming the gifts of God's people. Over time, we have assumed that we come to church from a place of deficit, needing to be filled, healed or saved from ourselves. Faith becomes a commodity or a balm that we need to fill us or fix us rather than a joyful expression of an everyday walk with God.

From the Great Thanksgiving to the early pot-luck dinners Paul attended in Acts, the gathering of the blessed to share and bring praise has been foundational to our life as church. Somehow the church got flipped and the kids in my group were simply ready to flip it back. They were not coming to receive but to share in a blessing. We told them they had gifts to share and they believed us! They just didn't know how to express those gifts when the language and structure around them was

foreign. By allowing youth to engage technology as a practice of faith, they became more and more comfortable and capable of sharing their gifts.

Need for Meetings or Meeting Needs

One of the biggest challenges to applying technology in your program, or finding ways to “flip the church” has been my own brain. I have years of experience doing things one way and a lot of experiential data collected to justify my approach. More than breaking routines, I find myself afraid of losing control. I used to know how most of our time would be spent.

For years, each meeting started with a “check-in” time where we shared what we had been up to since we last met. This was my chance to feel out the group see how they would react to each other. They shared highs and lows since their last time together and I could see who was in a good mood and who was cranky. The kids got to catch up with teach other and get to know each other better while I took the emotional temperature of the room. At some point, this ritual grew tiresome. I watched lots of kids on phones, texting or updating their Facebook while we shared. I’d fuss at them for not paying attention to each other and not being part of the community.

Eventually I realized that I was missing a bigger picture. I was the only one who needed this ritual. They had already done this same activity on-line. They had posted pictures of the stories they were sharing on Instagram or Facebook and even “liked” or commented on each other’s posts. Check-in happened before they walked into the room and they were sharing the experience of being together with those who couldn’t make it rather than listening to something they already knew. The very nature of our gathering had changed.

Instead of “how have you been?” the group wanted to ask, “What are we going to do?” Just showing up for the sake of being a group was not enough to interest any of them. This

means that many of our assumptions about why we meet may not be true. The “encounter group” experience that shaped my youth and young adult experience was not something the kids in my care were looking for or needed. They didn’t feel a need to have time away from their family because they already have lots of that. They didn’t feel the need to hear what their peers think about things because they can read that on-line any time. They didn’t need to hear what their peers had been up to because they already saw the pictures or a Vine of it or watched the footage on YouTube. The purpose of meetings, when I was young, was to meet. That, in itself, was a significant enough of a purpose to draw us together. While my brain still clings to personal experience as a template, the day of the encounter group has passed.

In an attempt to better understand what our youth needed out of their time together, I asked them to list what they had enjoyed most over the past year. Surprisingly, the top item was visiting shut-ins. We had taken potted plants to each one in the fall. Next was a night we went out for ice-cream and a soccer game. One of the kids from Church couldn’t make it so we went to his game together. Another event that was never shared as a favorite, but always found its way into conversation was a “clean-up” night in the Church. We cleaned our room and helped sort some others. They all remembered it. It wasn’t a negative experience but they were not ready to call it a favorite. Still, they remembered it and it was part of their group identity.

Years of training in youth ministry had taught me all about age appropriate programming, psycho-social development and the needs youth have to be with peers to share and learn. What got left out was community. Looking back on the previous year’s calendar, I realized how little we did outside our group meeting space or social circle. It’s much easier to contain our activity in the church basement. It was easier to clean up, and required less planning, but if we spend all our time in the basement then the kids aren’t really part of the

church. They liked being together but loved being part of something bigger.

Building this year's calendar started with these three core experiences:

- ◆ Connecting with members of the church who were older and younger than us
- ◆ Supporting what youth in our church were doing, despite their attendance
- ◆ Finding ways to work and serve together.

In the time left we would play games, eat snacks, study the Bible, and pray. Even the grouchiest of the group got excited about this plan. We made a list of favorite snacks and games to get that out of the way, then let the kids dictate what issues were important to them. It is important to note that we did not leave all the planning up to the kids. We took their interests. We took their ideas. Then, we set out a schedule that was less about meeting together and more about meeting the needs of others.

Keeping Community

Through all of this, I worried about how all the changes would impact the feeling of community and relationships within the group. I knew we were headed in the right direction but hoped we could find some time to simply let the members of the group hang out and have time to strengthen their connections. After all, there is great power in just playing together. Luckily, we found a digital platform for that too. Actually, the kids invited me to join them in their game. I heard two of the kids discussing a game called "Clash of Clans" that they played on their phones and tablets. They were creating a new "clan" (social group within the game that works together to help each other). They invited me to join, and I took the opportunity to let them teach me and be my "clan leaders." When they started, there were ten in the clan. Four were active in the youth program. Three more were cousins who

attended occasionally. Two others were friends from school. The game includes a chat screen for players to request assistance or just visit and the group was very active.

The organizers listed the group as public so they soon had strangers joining them. This required them to set some expectations for who they would allow in the clan and expectations for behavior. "Don't cuss, participate and be loyal," were the agreed upon expectations. Quickly, the group included young people from Asia and Australia. They talked about school and learned about time-zones. The group leaders kicked out people who were rude or inappropriate. A community formed around play that reflected the ethics and faith we shared at Church.

I discovered they were connecting through other games too. They played on-line games and shared through social media. They connected in ways that I hadn't imagined. My concern was keeping them connected but connection was a language they spoke fluently already. I just didn't know their dialect. The digital connections were not the same as the face to face meetings of my youth but they served a similar role. I had another epiphany as my youth introduced me to on-line gaming, or to put it in old youth group language, a digital "icebreaker" or "group builder." Somewhere in my mind, I heard a commercial spokesperson saying, "Community: there is an app for that!"

Apps and Application

What I have learned from my youth over the past few years could be quickly dismissed as a list of computer games and phone apps. Critics would ask, "How are you shaping faith?" At one point in my ministry, I would have offered a similar critique. Now, I'm less concerned about controlling how faith is shaped and more curious what new way God will shape us. Digital platforms for ministry are in their infancy. We are just beginning to understand how to make community mobile. We are just beginning to connect people beyond the bounds of buildings and committees. We are

just beginning to see what new thing God is doing.

Ironically, technology isn't really offering us something new. In reality, technology is taking us back to a time when church happened at home and with our friends. Technology is forcing us to make faith formation a portable, everyday experience rather than a Sunday

morning commodity. Technology is inviting us to share the Gospel much broader than any "bring a friend campaign" could ever reach. This is a time to ask ourselves, "How will we tell the story?" The answer to that question will determine whether anyone hears us or not.



Where Are You Going on Your Mission Trip This Summer?

Bronwyn Skov and Shannon Kelly

It seems like a simple enough question, especially if your youth group or young adult community engages in this perennial rite of passage over the course of the program year. But this can also be a Pandora's box of a question. "Why do we "do mission trips"? Are we engaging mission as disciples? Or are we essentially doing youth and young adult ministry tourism with a volunteer service component? Are we fully committed to relationship building through cultural immersion? Or are we privileged people going off to help "those poor folks?" Are we breaking the bonds of poverty by addressing injustice and generational oppression? Or are we being generous and polite and trying to "do the right thing" in the name of Jesus?

It gets a little fuzzy when we explore our motivations around the tradition of mission trips. In the wake of so many natural disasters in recent decades we've witnessed the coining of new phrases like "compassion fatigue." Non-profit organizations have had to make the distinction between relief work and development work. And organizations who claim to be missionary in nature have had to grapple with the negative connotations around the word "mission" which can invoke deep emotions around historic colonialization, the cycle of poverty, and the loss of indigenous languages and cultural heritage.

There can also be great value in taking youth and young adults away from familiar settings to bond as a group, to learn about people and places unknown to them, and to engage in hard work to accomplish a common goal. Our hope is that we can help guide you to positive mission engagement without causing personal hurt or institutional harm. Attitudes and practices related

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to mission and service have changed considerably in recent years, shifting away from “doing to” or “doing for” toward “doing with” or “being with.”

Discerning Mission

Speaking from our own experiences of ministering to youth and young adults in the Episcopal Church where we have served at the congregational, regional, and international levels, we realize that the first crucial step in planning mission is to ask yourself and your ministry team what your motivation is for taking a mission trip. Did someone tell you that you had to do it? Did your group discern that it wanted to go on a mission trip? Are the parents pushing you to go? Are the youth and young adults saying that they want to engage in mission? Are you doing it because other ministries in the area are engaged in mission? Do you feel called to engage in mission so you can learn, experience, and discover?

This is the time for you and your ministry team to be honest with yourselves about what your core values for the mission trip are and how you can be guided by them in this process.

Through collaboration with members of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in the early 2000s, members of the youth ministry leadership team for the Episcopal Church began to explore the notion of mission *exchange* rather than mission *trip*. Eventually core values and operational principles were developed to reflect these shifts as related to mission experiences, cultural immersion opportunities, and pilgrimages. The Episcopal Church then applied these core values into the development of a Youth in Mission Manual. (<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/episcopal-youth-mission-manual>)

Following is an excerpt from the introduction of the manual that was released during a youth event the summer of 2014. “Be forewarned: ‘doing with’ and ‘being with’ call for a bigger personal commitment than simply doing a job for someone or visiting a religious shrine. But they also lead to richer, more

rewarding experiences.” To achieve that end, the manual stresses the following about plans for mission engagement (these can easily be adapted to reflect your faith community, religious affiliation, and guiding principles):

- Mission travel should be clearly defined as an experience based in spiritual practice on the understanding of our faith through our Baptismal promises, and on the hallmarks of mission as outlined in the Five Marks of Mission. (<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/five-marks-mission>)
- Participants must respect the dignity and integrity of every community and individual by being open to diverse cultural expressions and/or by allowing community partners to define their own needs and assets for meeting those needs.
- Organizers should emphasize a mutual relationship between people rather than simply observing, working for, or serving another and should be focused on sustainable development and possibly systemic change in addition to single acts of isolated kindness.
- A significant amount of time and energy should be committed to spiritual, emotional, and practical preparation and community building among missionaries as well as appropriate follow-up and follow-through when the trip is done.

Mission engagement that has integrity and potential for transformation shouldn't be a simple stop, drop, and go-on-a-summer-mission-trip mountaintop event. We need to explore the depth of our motivation through the lens of our Christian identity. We also need to invite our young people into mission as a new chapter in the story of their own journeys in faith. We need to take steps in preparation to open their hearts and minds to experiencing discomfort, deep sadness, boundless joy, frustration, guilt, gratitude and many, many questions. We need to teach them

to receive unexpected gifts, and to find ways to be vulnerable so that relationship, kindness, understanding, and compassion can grow.

Mission Discernment and Reflection

Discernment is an important part of the process for planning a mission experience. Discernment is the process of determining where and what God is calling you to do. This takes time as you read Scripture, reflect, and do intentional listening to each other and to God. Below are a few ideas for Bible reflections that may help you discern where God is calling you.

Gifts Reflection

Approach your discernment by first naming the gifts you have and then reflecting on how God might be calling you to use those gifts.

Bible Reflection One

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. (1 Peter 4:10)

As people of God, we are all called to use the gifts that God has given us to serve one another. Use this scripture to reflect:

- What gifts has God given you?
- How can you use your gifts to serve?
- How can you use all of the gifts to engage in mission?
- In what ways can you or are you serving those around you?
- How are others serving you?

Bible Reflection Two

What are you going to do with what you have been given?

- Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-25)
- Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11)

Both of these scriptures offer an opportunity to reflect on what you have been given by God and what you do with those gifts. Read one or both of the scriptures and reflect.

- What gifts do you have to share with others?
- In what ways are you sharing those gifts?
- Are there other ways those gifts can benefit the community?
- What new thing is God calling you to do with your gifts?
- What gifts do you see in others?

Now that you have had time to reflect, how do you think God is calling you and your group to engage in ministry? How can this engagement in mission help youth or young adults live more deeply into their journey of faith? How might you open yourself and your community to transformation through this experience?

What Kind of Mission?

Pray, think, and talk about what kind of mission experience you and your group are feeling called to do. Outlined below are five different kinds of projects.

1. *Social Action*: educates young people on how oppression operates in our society. This kind of experience helps the participants recognize how God is already at work among those they encounter.
2. *Cultural Immersion*: educates young people through total immersion into a specific culture so they can learn through their experience.
3. *Spiritual Pilgrimage*: a journey that you undertake as a quest for a religious purpose
4. *Disaster Relief*: assisting those who need help after a disaster such as hurricane, tornado, or severe storm
5. *Community Exchange*: a mutual project where two communities spend time in

each the other community to learn and pray together

Preparing for Mission

A deep, honest, thorough mission discernment process should yield a call to a specific type of mission and potential partnerships and locations. Once you have determined the nature of your community's engagement make sure that you communicate this to your local faith community before you make the invitations for support and participation. Explain whether it's a social action project, cultural immersion, a spiritual pilgrimage, disaster relief, or a community exchange.

Money

Your group will need to prepare a detailed budget that includes transportation, food, supplies, insurance, and lodging. Once you have a budget, you can determine how you will pay for the trip. Do you have money in your budget? Does the church have discretionary funds they can use? Will you need to do a fundraiser? What will the participants pay to offset costs? Will some participants need scholarships? As you think through cost and funding, don't forget to think about other groups in the congregation or your region who may have funds to help with mission.

Education

The next step following communication about the opportunity should be education. The entire congregation should be included in this step, even if the invitation for participants will only be extended to one segment of the population, like youth and/or young adults. Mission engagement should be taken up by a group of individuals from an informed community together from a place of knowledge, encouragement, and group support and interest. All ages should be able to engage the mission even if they aren't the ones being sent. Plan educational opportunities that include activities, projects, and prayers so all

can feel a part of the engagement. Make sure that similar opportunities can be offered within the community where your group will be going so that the sending and receiving communities can begin to build relationships and share expectations. Part of the education of the community may also be including them in fundraising and supporting the project monetarily.

Logistics

Make sure you and your team of adults plan out all the logistics of the trip.

- How will people sign up?
- What is the deadline for registration?
- When is payment due?
- What medical forms will you need?
- What insurance will you need for the trip?
- Make sure you have permission slips, medical, legal, media release, and behavior covenant forms on file
- Research what you will need to do if you travelling internationally.
- Arrange transportation far in advance and try to get a good deal by talking to the company or airline.
- Create a schedule for communicating with the participants as well as the parents.
- Plan meetings far in advance so people can get them on their calendars. Make sure you communicate which ones are mandatory.
- Give the participants a packing list at least a month before the trip.
- Create your schedule while you are traveling and make sure each team member knows what they are responsible for each day.

Commissioning and Sending

When you engage in a mission trip, you are being sent forth as a representative of your community. Before the group leaves, the faith community needs to have the opportunity to

prayerfully commission them to go forth to engage in that mission. Ideally this will happen on the Sunday morning before the trip begins. It can also be a prayer service devoted specifically to this task. Below is a sample Commissioning Service.

Commissioning Service

Worship Leader:

Friends in Christ, we have come together from near and far to create this remarkable community. We gather today to ask God's blessing on us as we go into the mission field. Let us open our hearts to all we meet on this journey, remembering that we all are the body of Christ.

Leader: There are different gifts,

People: but the same Spirit who gives them.

Leader: There are different ways of serving God,

People: but it is the same Lord who is served.

Leader: Each one of us is given a gift by the Spirit,

People: to use for the common good.

Leader: Together we are the body of Christ,

People: and individually members of the body of Christ.

A group of presenters says to the worship leader:

I/we present to you these persons as they prepare to go into the world to do the work we have been called to do.

All Stand

Leader:

People of God, we are sending you forth on your journey of mission so that you may engage in mission around the world. Will

you serve in this special work with energy, intelligence, imagination and love, treasuring your experiences as opportunities to teach and to grow?

People:

We will.

Leader:

Will you support one another in prayer as we venture into the world to do our mission work?

People:

We will.

Leader: Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, we come before you as servants called to go forth from this place to build, share, and engage your mission. Bless us as we go forth to _____ (insert some of the mission opportunities). Surround us with your loving care, protect us from every danger and bring us safely home again so we may continue to share your love and grace with everyone we encounter.

Coming Home

Coming home is the beginning of the next step on this journey. Now is the time that all of you have the opportunity to make sense out of the experience. It is important to find time to talk about the struggles and the joys, the fears and the hopes, the regrets and the dreams. Were there unmet expectations? What were their learnings? If they were to go on a mission again, what would they want to be different? What would they want to be the same? What would they hope for and work toward on that mission?



A Formula for Summer Ministry

Lee Yates

Are you preparing to gear up or close up for the summer? While offering great opportunity for special events and creative ministry, summer can also be a season of frustration. The warm days invite people into God's creation and the school calendar invites them to theme parks, beaches, and grandma's house. The transient nature of the season often leaves churches wondering what happened to all the families. Not all families are traveling though. For many, the summer is a fearful time. Saddled with the additional cost of childcare, and without the support of school meal programs, many families struggle financially. This often leaves churches feeling helpless to respond to the swell of need. These different dynamics make planning for summer ministry complicated. We are often tempted to copy and paste last year's schedule (or lack of one), but if we take the time to evaluate the needs of those around us, and plan in advance, summer has great potential for inspirational ministry.

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There are a number of creative summer options but all of them require some level of a resource I call VEO which is “Volunteer Energy Output.” If you imagine your congregation as a large energy tank, and a measure of 100 being full, you can visualize your VEO. For each hour a volunteer spends planning, leading, promoting or cleaning up from an event, VEO is spent. For example, a church yard sale needs people to work for a few hours on a Saturday, plus people to put up signs, organize and haul off leftovers. This requires a lot of VEO as compared to asking for donations during a weekly worship service.

We must also remember the equally precious SEO or “Staff Energy Output.” Every ministry requires one or both of these valuable resources. Planning for summer should start with reflection on how much of each you have available. Figuring out your SEO can be complicated. Some congregations are more dependent on staff than others. To visualize your SEO energy tank, think about the ratio of volunteer hours to staff hours. You will have to use your best judgment to judge its size. For example, one congregation might expect their secretary and custodian to do much of the promotion and set-up for a yard sale while another would be more volunteer driven. Assign your SEO an appropriate number for full capacity. As you enter the summer, how much energy does each thank have? Understanding how much energy your church has to offer is a crucial tool for determining how you give shape to summer ministry.

The next step is evaluating the needs around your congregation. Looking both internally, and into the community around you. Think about the needs of multiple generations. What do children, youth, parents, retirees, and senior adults need? Think about your congregation, the neighborhood around the church, and the larger community. Where do needs overlap? This is a good time to look at traditional summer ministry programs and think about which needs they are meeting. This may help you think of a need you have left off your list and make sure your programming

has purpose. Nothing bleeds a church of VEO and SEO like programs without purpose.

Now it’s time to start making decisions about your summer schedule. What opportunities will you offer the communities you serve and when will they happen? As we discuss various options for summer ministry, keep your VEO and SEO in mind. You might even keep a running tally on a note card as you plan. Remember, every ministry takes either VEO or SEO but most consume both. Events like a spiritual retreat or mission trip might provide some inspiration, refilling VEO or SEO, but there is still a limit to how much a community can pour out over time.

To help balance your summer energy output, I recommend limiting the scope of high VEO events and broadening the invitation for low VEO events. In other words, if a ministry is labor intensive on volunteers, make sure your congregation is being fed by it. Control the setting. If an activity is not labor intensive, invite more people. If a large crowd surprises you, it won’t use up all your VEO. This is probably easier to understand with some tangible examples. Let’s start with VEO and Vacation Bible School.

VBS and VEO

What does “VBS” mean to you? I have to admit, my childhood memories are all blurred together when it comes to summer ministries, but Vacation Bible School has always been a part of the mix. Memories of Vanilla Wafers and Hawaiian punch, scooter boards in the church basement, and loud percussion experiments are precious to me. I can’t put much detail with those memories but they clearly help me connect my understanding of church with memories of joy. Over the years, I’ve moved from participant, to volunteer, to director, to writer. I’ve watched the numbers of kids, volunteers, and the days making up VBS get smaller. This is clearly a high VEO event. It takes lots of people contributing lots of hours and that doesn’t even take into account the

children participating who give their time and energy to the experience.

Many congregations approach Vacation Bible School as an outreach or evangelism program. They invite every child in town and place giant signs out front. Leaders guess at how many crafts and groups will be needed and have to juggle the first night to adapt for the real numbers. Some congregations have started shortening their program to just a few days, or even a Friday evening and Saturday event, mostly because VEO can't keep up with the demands of promotion and the enormity of the unknowns.

In reality, few congregations see high retention in the children who attend for Vacation Bible School. Sometimes a new child will find their way into the community or a new family will keep attending worship. More often than not, the congregation sees a swell of children for the event, many of whom know the activities already because they attended another VBS in town using the same curriculum. At the end of Vacation Bible School, volunteers are spent and staff are in need of a real vacation. This goes beyond the pastoral and program staff to include the custodian and secretary who do more for these types of events than most people consider. For some congregations, the end of VBS is the end of their VEO for the summer. They are spent. They are done. Those running a shortened or scaled back VBS often struggle with more than exhaustion. The event becomes an anal reminder of what used to be. Instead of being excited about the number of children who are there, much attention is paid to all that has been lost.

Shaking the VBS Blues

What if, instead of inviting everyone, you charged a registration fee, for which members could receive a "scholarship" if needed, and asked every child to register like a day-camp? Children could still bring a friend, but someone who pays money will be more likely to attend and registration provides a firm

count for meals, crafts, and volunteer planning. With no need for yard signs and ads in the paper, and a firm understanding of the events logistic needs, VEO and SEO are lowered significantly. This event still takes a lot of energy, but not as much and the church has some fuel left in the tank.

First Christian Church of New Castle, IN made this change three years ago. They actually dropped the VBS name and called it "Day Camp." Instead of 40-50 kids (15-20 from the congregation's active members) for a weekend event, they had 20-25 for 5 days. They also achieved about 90% attendance over a three year period and about 25% of visitors became active participants in the life of the congregation. For one week, volunteers led children in songs, crafts and games. They made fun snacks, and studied scripture. They event did pulled off some field trips since they knew exactly how many were coming.

What if, instead of inviting others to come to you, VBS went to them? Is there a children's home or hospital in your area? What type of program might you offer for them in their own space? What type of relationship could be built between your children and theirs in this time together? Many organizations are offering youth mission trip experiences where they lead a VBS for homeless children or impoverished communities. Could your church take VBS on the road?

What if VBS was divided up and spread out through the summer? Could VBS be offered each Sunday after worship? How would this impact your VEO and SEO? While this model lacks the consistent community build by a week of play and study together, it does allow those who might be out of town on certain dates to only miss a portion of VBS.

What if you created a new model that no one has thought of yet? By taking a look at your VEO, SEO and the needs around you, Vacation Bible School can take on new life.

Is Sunday School Out for Summer?

Some of the extra energy left from a lower VEO program for Vacation Bible School could go into Sunday School. Compared to other ministries, Sunday School is not that high of a VEO event. There is energy output for curriculum and supply organization but the weekly teaching does not have a very high VEO. If one person gives one hour a week, they are not being worn out, unless the hour lacks purpose. For example, if a teacher prepares and is present to teach but only has one child each week, they can become frustrated. Even more so if no one shows up for their class. Low summer attendance leads many congregations to cancel classes over the summer.

Others are experimenting with creative solutions. Public school teachers get the summer off, so why not Sunday School teachers? What if you run an intergenerational Sunday School, combining classes for a couple months. If you run one class instead of four, you have cut your VEO dramatically. What if you invite some other leaders to substitute for a couple months and offer fresh energy? What if you a Vacation Bible School curriculum (different than your week long theme), broken up over 7-8 weeks? This could provide a fun theme, enticing kids to get their parents up on Sunday mornings. What if youth serve as junior teachers over the summer, learning to lead and helping regular teachers?

Donuts, BYO McDonalds, or an opening sing-a-long in the sanctuary are all ways to pump a little life into an overlooked summer ministry without ratcheting up your VEO or SEO to dangerous levels. Remember, Sunday mornings are hard to predict so don't set yourself up for disappointment. This is probably not the season to do a Sunday School attendance rally, but you also don't have to surrender.

Traveling with the Church

Mission Trips and Church Camps are a central part of many congregations' summer season. Congregations often have long lasting relationships with Church Camps or other shared ministry programs. These events are a wonderful opportunity to fill up the congregation's VEO. Youth and children come back from these events on fire, with God shining out of them in ways that are hard to explain. The energy required for camp participation is usually minimal, with promotion and collecting forms being the most tiring tasks. When you compare that to the energy young people bring back from these experiences, it is most often a gain in PEO. Some congregations have adults who go to camp with their young people. Adult participants may come home ready for some sleep, but filled up spiritually. By getting away from the pressures and expectations of daily life and living in a prayerful community, batteries are recharged and the church is blessed for having a member take time to go and serve. Be careful of an SEO drain in larger congregations if a staff member is expected to collect all forms, transport youth, and be present at the camp. Remember, collecting forms does not require ordination. This can be a shared responsibility. Make sure no one has to do the dirty work all alone. Don't be afraid to invite someone who has not been to camp before to pick up campers. The stories they hear may turn them into next year's volunteer counselor.

Serving others is another way building community and fulfilling Christ's call to "feed my sheep." Some congregations visit work stations that are organized while others create their own projects. Some send multi-generational work teams while others only send youth. Either way, traveling and working together can be a powerful experience. There is a work trip for every church. It just takes a willingness to name your own gifts and interests and the planning to connect them. Like camp, SEO can run high on such trips, but

the results bring energy into the church rather than running it down. This holds as true for week long trips that cover hundreds of miles as it does for local work projects.

Families Logging In

I've heard lots of sermons (many preached during the announcements) about worship attendance over the summer. Ministers twist lots of arms and lay the guilt on very thick to keep people in worship over the summer. While a family having a bonding experience on a hiking trail one Sunday morning might keep them out of worship, it can still be a healthy thing for that family and the church. Remember, the VEO tank has to be refilled somehow. Summer is a time when lots of families are reconnecting outside the hectic pace of school, work, and extracurricular activities. We need to encourage participation in the church community without shaming people for being healthy. There is a very unhealthy assumption in many churches that people can only find Jesus inside their walls and within their community. When families are healthy, churches will be stronger. This is a reality we need to embrace, making sure we are not sending mixed messages.

Not all family travels are for rest and reconnection. Children and youth are going to play on sports teams that travel in the summer regardless of what day they play. Clubs and organizations will offer youth fun opportunities to learn and grow over the summer. While these endeavors may stretch families and lead us to question their priorities, we are better served by meeting the spiritual needs of our families where they are, geographically and emotionally.

What if we spent our SEO and VEO on resources for prayer and reflection that a family could use while hiking or visiting with other families at a soccer tournament? What if we equipped our families for spiritual reflection on their journeys rather than grousing about their attendance in the board meeting, parking lot, or even the pulpit?

Families might pick up a CD of worship songs to sing along with in the van, or listen to a sermon or devotion downloaded to their tablet as a pod-cast. Websites like www.VibrantFaithAtHome.org offer great activities for families of every shape and size to experience outside the structure of the congregation. Church websites can be updated to provide more access to worship for those who cannot physically attend. SEO or VEO could be put into recommending great activities to those who won't be in worship. In return, families might be invited to send postcards of their journey to the church to build a summer travel map. Members could pray for those on the road or those about to leave. Summer could end with a celebration of people sharing "God sightings" from their travels. By adding reminders of God's presence to a family trip or a team's tournament, we actually raise the VEO of the congregation. People feel connected and encouraged. People come back refreshed and aware of God's role in their lives.

Cooking Up Some Community

When people are not traveling, summer can be a wonderful time to build community. A weekly or monthly cookout at the Church or a local park requires very little VEO. A grill, a pack of hot-dogs, and a "bring your own drinks" invitation can do wonders for a community. Throw in a Frisbee and find someone to offer a prayer or devotional and you have taken it to another level. Some Churches that have Summer gatherings around meals invite people to bring their own meat for the grill, offer a dessert exchange, or plan a softball game around the event.

Instead of inviting everyone in town to VBS, what if you put out an invitation for Sunday night cookouts? Neighbors could receive printed invitations. Families could bring friends. It takes a lot less VEO to have a few extra packs of hotdogs in the cooler than

to accommodate unknown numbers at Vacation Bible School. This is one of those places where we can see the principle of VEO and proximity at work. Inviting large numbers to a low VEO event is much more manageable than attempting such an invitation with more complicated ministries. A short social gathering is also more likely to draw an entire family, rather than just the children. This is a great opportunity to connect visitors to the Church family.

What if you added a movie to the evening plans? Those who have dinner plans might come late for a movie and dessert on the lawn. This can provide a longer social time for some and flexibility to others. If you are not charging admission you don't have to worry about any copyright issues and can choose movies that touch on spiritual issues. Some of the most popular movies have a strong message about a social issue or dive into life experiences that our faith can inform. What if the next Sunday's sermon was connected to the movie? Suddenly we are connecting fellowship, study, hospitality and worship with low VEO events. Someone is writing a sermon already. There is no additional SEO required to connect these dots. In the end, such ministries might actually bring in as much energy as they require to organize.

Church as a Mission

While many attempt "spring cleaning" at home, it can be difficult to find time in midst of Lent, Easter, Spring Breaks, and preparation for summer ministry to really give the Church building the attention it needs. Sunday School classes keep meeting and other activities have assumptions about the consistent availability of space. Summer might be a good time to switch things up. If you are combining Sunday School classes, this is a great time for cleaning, painting or basic repairs in unused class rooms. Even if you are not combining classes, the Sunday youth are on a retreat is a great time to fix up their regular meeting space. If you are doing worship outside once a month, that

offers a 13 day window for paint or furniture polish to dry in the sanctuary. Projects like these can be high in VEO but often different volunteers than are usually counted on for traditional summer ministry. The person cleaning out the baptistery and the others helping clean the nursery toys may not be the same members who teach VBS. The person fixing light fixtures may not be the same person who drives children to camp. Look at your summer schedule to see how your ministry plans might open the door for other possibilities.

Go with the Flow

Another aspect of VEO and SEO to consider is the order of summer ministries. Look at your calendar and see how close events are to each other and how high they are in VEO. Consider how one ministry impacts the other events on the calendar. For example, it might be exhausting to offer a family work project the week after Vacation Bible School. Still, youth coming back from a work trip might be overflowing with VEO and bring great energy to Vacation Bible School a week or so later.

SEO is also an important consideration in your calendar. When are they getting a vacation? Are they getting a vacation? Many Church staff will sacrifice a family vacation or personal retreat time to support special events in the summer. Each staff member will have different needs. A pastor or "head of staff" may need a rest to catch their breath after Advent, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. If they have a family, there is a good chance Holy Week erased any change of a Spring Break get-away. Early summer may be the best time for them to get away and this needs to be part of the plan. Staff who work with faith formation ministry such as children, youth and families may need their vacation at the end of summer when all special events have come to an end, or even in the fall after programming is back up and running for the school year. Secretaries and custodians can often be forgotten in these conversations. Remember, all events require

communication and cleanup. How is the Church refilling these, often under paid and always over worked, servants? Be sure to consider how SEO of all Church staff is refilled.

Reader Beware and Be Blessed

Just by reading this, you have proven to be one of the most likely candidates for summer burn-out. There is no SPF level of sunscreen that can protect you from flaming out. The only defense is clear boundaries and good planning. Know your own limits and be honest about them. Encourage others to practice self-care while considering their gifts of time, talent and

energy. Running your congregation on an empty tank is dangerous and can have disastrous effects.

Enjoy the summer and allow the unique opportunities that the ever shortening season offer. Cherish the opportunity to evaluate and create, to change and grow. Invite the congregation to experiment and explore what God is up to within them and around them. Along the way, make notes on how much VEO or SEO different ministries consume. Next summer, look back on your notes and you will have an even clearer vision of your Church's potential for ministry. Eventually, you will find the perfect summer formula for your congregation.