

“Research-based Practices for Shaping Faith Formation across the Life Span”

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Part 1. Factors that Promote Faith Growth in the 1st Third of Life

1. Seven Faith Factors

(Source: *Souls in Transition*. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, Oxford Press, 2010)

Using the three NSYR research studies that followed adolescents into emerging adulthood, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell were able to identify seven factors that helped account for emerging adult religious commitment and practice.

A teenager who among his or her peers scored in the top one-quarter of a scale measuring these four factors—(1) *parental religion*, (2) *prayer*, (3) *importance of faith*, and (4) *scripture reading*—stands an 85% chance of landing in the Highest category of religion as an emerging adult; but one who scores in the Lowest one-quarter on that scale stands only a miniscule chance (0.4 percent) of landing at the high end of religion when he or she is 18-23 years old. In short, the combination of a teenager’s parent religion, importance of faith, prayer, and scripture reading makes an enormous substantive difference in religious outcomes during emerging adulthood.

A teenager who scores in the top quarter of a scale measuring three more factors—(5) *having supportive nonparent adults in one’s religious congregation*, (6) *having religious experiences*, and (7) *not doubting religious faith*—stands 75 times the chance of landing in the Highest category of religion compared to one who scores in the bottom quarter. These three variables taken alone thus also make a big difference in the probability that a teenager will end up being highly religious as he or she grows into emerging adulthood.

In brief, with these seven factors alone, we have identified some powerful teenage factors associated with and, we think, causing differences in emerging adult religious commitment and practice. (Smith and Snell, 220-221)

They also found that approximately 70% of youth who at some time or other before mid-emerging adulthood commit to live their lives for God, the vast majority appear to do so early in life, apparently before the age of 14. Most make their first commitments to God as children or during the preteen or very early teen years. Many religious trajectories followed in the course of life’s development seemed to be formed early on in life.

The Critical Role of Family

All of these findings point to the essential role of parents and the family in nurturing faith growth in the first third of life. Smith and Denton conclude,

Teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood. Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents’ religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously. At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization. (Smith and Snell, 232)

2. A Faith-Forming Congregational Culture

(The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry. Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto. EYM Publications, 2010)

The “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” presents 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 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 of the young people, 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.

Youth ministries do not exist on the side of or separate from the entire ongoing lives and ministries of these congregations. Youth ministries are integrated into and supported by the congregation as a whole. The research indicates that effective youth ministry exists as an integral dimension of youth-friendly, youth-engaging congregations. These congregations are powerful faith- and life-shaping systems. Young people do not grow and flourish in isolation in these congregations. They participate in families, friends, and intergenerational relationships. They move from one age to the next in a journey influenced by peers as well as those older and younger. Young people influence and are profoundly influenced by adults and youth. What is going on with young people in the congregation impacts the whole body and vice versa.

3. Sticky Faith: From High School to College

(*Sticky Faith*. Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford. Zondervan, 2011)

The benefits and blessings of being intergenerational is reflected in research as well. In their book *Sticky Faith* (2011), Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford examine the factors that make for “sticky faith” in the college years. One of those critical factors is the importance of congregations that maximize intergenerational relationships. First, they discovered that involvement in all-church (intergenerational) worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation.

While small groups, mentoring, justice works, and a host of other youth ministry activities are important, the reality is that the challenges of kids, ministry programs, and spiritual development are far too complicated to be met with a single solution. The closest our research has come to that definitive silver bullet is this sticky finding: high school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity. We found this to be true in our studies of both high school seniors AND college freshmen. (Powell et al., 2011, p. 75)

Second, they found that the more teenagers serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick: “the students we surveyed who had served in middle school or children’s ministry while they were in high school seemed to have stickier faith in college” (Powell et al., 2011, p. 75).

Third, when adults in the congregation show an interest in young people and build relationships with them, young people feel welcomed and valued. “More than any single program or event, adults’ making the effort to get to know the kids was far more likely to make the kids feel like a significant part of the church” (Powell et al., 2011, p. 77). And the influence of adult-youth relationships continues into the college years.

Contact from at least one adult from the congregation outside of the youth ministry during the first semesters of college is linked with Sticky Faith. Hearing from an adult from their home church—whether via text, email, phone, or something you’ve perhaps heard of called the US Postal Service—seems to help students take their faith to college with them. In fact, the ongoing contact still makes a difference *three years later*. (Powell and Clark, 2011, p. 100)

Fourth, congregations that increase the ratio of adults to kids increase the likelihood that college-aged young adults will stay engaged with their church (Powell and Clark, 2011, p. 100). Chap Clark of Fuller Seminary suggests a 5:1 adult to youth ratio in youth ministry, that is, five adults who are willing to commit to invest in one teenager in a variety of ways (Powell and Clark, 2011, p. 101). This view is supported by the Search Institute’s research in *Grading Grown-Ups—American Adults Report on their Real Relationships with Kids*: “There is clear evidence that young people benefit from multiple, sustained relationships outside their immediate family. Search Institute research has found that the more adults a young person reports that he or she can turn to, the better off that young person is. Yet just 22% of the youth surveyed reported having strong relationships with five or more adults other than their parents.” (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, 2001, p. 5)

Part 2. Factors that Promote Faith Growth in Young Adulthood

In *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* Richard Flory and Donald Miller report on a study of churches that are engaging emerging adults (post-boomers) and the experience of young adults in these churches. They observe that these emerging adults have embedded their lives in spiritual communities in which their desire and need for both expressive/experiential activities, whether through art, music, or service-oriented activities, and for a close-knit, physical community and communion with others are met. They are seeking to develop a balance for individualism and rational asceticism through religious experience and spiritual meaning in an embodied faith. The dominant characteristic across the young adults they interviewed was a desire for a theologically grounded belief that makes sense cognitively, combined with nonrational expressive tendencies—they want a faith that makes cognitive sense to them and that is also an expressive, embodied spiritual experience. Young adult Christians are searching for a more holistic faith than what a purely cognitive and rational approach can offer. They are seeking both a deep spiritual experience and a community experience, each of which provides them with meaning in their lives, and each of which is meaningless without the other.

Flory and Miller characterize post-Boomer faith as **Expressive Communalism**—reflecting an emphasis on embodiment and community: using one’s body in worship; in living out, or embodying, Christian teachings, in service; and in a desire for life in a particular faith community where they can be both personally fulfilled and serve others. They desire a theologically grounded belief that makes cognitive sense to them and that is also an expressive, embodied spiritual experience. Using their research as a guide, emerging adults seek congregations and faith formation that:

- offer community and spirituality in the context of a clearly defined faith tradition

- offer worship and faith formation that is visual and experiential
- respond to their needs for empowerment, leadership opportunities, responsibility, and accountability, as well as authenticity and accessibility
- strengthen their distinctive Christian identity so that they know who they are and what they believe, and are able to honestly encounter religious differences, understand people of other faiths, and explore areas of mutuality
- provide opportunities for serving the surrounding community, “bringing the church to the community”
- study the Bible and Christian tradition, then apply it to life in an environment that promotes relationship building and encourages questioning
- engage them in creative uses of the history, traditions, and rituals of different Christian traditions for a more physically and visually oriented practice; and encouraging the development of ancient spiritual disciplines, such as silence and contemplation

In the study *Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation*, Tobin Belzer, Richard Flory, Nadia Roumani, and Brie Loskota report on their study of fifteen Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim congregations who are engaging young adults in congregational life. While they differ organizationally, they share numerous characteristics in terms of approach. Over the course of one year, the research team visited congregations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington, D.C., urban areas where large populations of each religious faith have strong representation. Through exploratory conversations with young adults, religious leaders, and professionals working in religious institutions in each city, the team chose congregations within each religious tradition that represent a broad theological spectrum, from conservative to progressive. Each congregation also was chosen for the intergenerational participation of its members. Based on qualitative interviews and participant observation, the team constructed profiles of Christian (Protestant and Catholic), Jewish, and Muslim congregations. The team spent several weeks collecting data at each of fifteen congregations, ultimately conducting approximately one hundred interviews with congregational leaders, lay leaders, and young adults.

They found six common themes, across religious traditions, which captured what young adults were seeking in a congregation and what congregations were doing to address their religious and spiritual needs.

1. ***Young adults want to feel that their presence is valued.*** Those who are interested in congregational life are aware that they are exceptional—they know that the majority of young adults are not interested in religious affiliation. As such, those who participate want to be acknowledged for their unusual commitment and interest. To show that young adults’ presence is valued, congregations:
 - facilitate regular intergenerational communication between congregational members, staff, and leadership
 - regularly and frequently show appreciation for young lay leaders
 - underwrite young adult activities as a way to acknowledge the importance of young adult participation.
 - hire a specific staff person to coordinate young adult programming.
 - provide physical space within the place of worship for young adult programs.
2. ***Young adults want a sense of ownership in their congregations.*** They value opportunities to assume leadership roles within their peer group and welcome chances to move into leadership in the larger congregation. To engender a sense of ownership, congregations:
 - enable young adults to create and plan their own events

- create leadership positions for young adults both within their peer group and within the larger congregation
 - organize committees that are lay-led by young adults
3. ***Young adults' interests in religion are multifaceted.*** For some, their deep sense of belonging comes from being a part of a community. They want to connect with others who are also articulating a sense of self. Some young adults desire emotional support and guidance. Some want their religious group to be a place where they can develop their professional and support networks. Many single young adults participate in congregations in the hope of meeting a life partner. Many young adults want to learn about increasing their practice of tradition and rituals. Some seek to deepen their relationship with God. Some approach religion through the intellectual study of modern socio-historical texts or the religious canon. Others value the opportunity to effect social change with a group of people who share their values. Still other young adults seek a space for creative religious expression through music, art, writing, or dance. To acknowledge that young adults interests in religion are multifaceted, congregations:
- offer multiple points of entry: social, educational, spiritual, cultural, emotional, and theological
 - create multiple arenas for young adults to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities
 - organize affinity groups so that the young adults can find like-minded peers
 - offer opportunities where young adults can sometimes engage as participants, and other times take on the responsibilities of leading
4. ***Young adults thrive when they are “met where they are.”*** Young adults do not want to be judged for their level of religious practice or knowledge, nor feel ashamed by their lack of knowledge or practice. They want to approach religious practice focused on meaning and intention. While respecting the religious standards of the congregation and their religion at large, many took pride in making their own choices based on personal factors such as level of knowledge, peer group, and religious upbringing. To meet young adults where they are, congregations:
- offer learning opportunities directed specifically to young adults
 - explore and explain the congregation's (denomination's) theological framework through a learning process that is open to questioning
 - reduce fee structure so that participation is financially viable
5. ***Young adults welcome opportunities to feel emotionally affected.*** Young adults want to feel moved by music, a connection to their history, a sense of cultural heritage, and nostalgia. They want to be emotionally engaged and feel like a participant, not an audience member, at worship services. To produce an affective, or emotional, experience:
- religious leaders cultivate an atmosphere during worship services that enables young adults to be participants instead of audience members
 - leadership that is accessible and charismatic
 - congregation funds a charismatic and young staff person who can cultivate a community of young adults
6. ***Young adults respond to a theoretical and practical balance between the particular and the universal.*** Every individual interviewed acknowledged that there are many ways to believe in God and to live a religious life. Young adults appreciate an acknowledgement of the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. They do

not want to feel cloistered from the outside world. Instead, they want to be able to share their spiritual interests with peers of different faiths. Through the articulation of similarities and differences, they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith. To create balance between the particular and the universal, congregations:

- focus on the thoughtful transmission of the theology and tradition of the particular congregation, not on theological debates (especially those that disparage other religious traditions or denominations).
- create an atmosphere that is self-consciously open and analytical: acknowledging the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation
- facilitate interfaith and interdenominational exchange

The research team also found that young adults “exercised typical American individualism as they decided about associating with religious communities, sometimes participating in more than one simultaneously” (Belzer, et al., 106). The research team identified the following factors influencing young adult’s participation in a faith community:

- choosing a specific community, rather than committing to a larger denomination
- making choices based on a number of factors, such as interpersonal relationships, worship style, geographic location, opportunities for involvement, and accessibility of leadership
- deciding how often to attend and the extent of their participation
- choosing how much of the official teachings to accept and how much ritual observance to practice
- balancing their individual authority with their identity as members of a community and religious tradition
- seeking a community where there is both flexibility and structure
- being experientially engaged as opposed to a “show up and watch” style of religious participation
- building interpersonal relationships with people who express and explore their religious identities in similar ways; relationship building was a fundamental aspect of young adults’ congregational experience (Belzer, et al., 106-107)

In *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them* Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, report on the findings from three LifeWay Research projects, including a large scale survey of young adults and a survey of 149 churches that were reaching an extraordinary number of young adults. Based on the responses of young adults in the research studies, the research team identified four markers of young adult ministry:

1. **Community** is vital to the emerging generations. For them, life is meant to be experienced together, and they sense a need to be involved in genuine relationships with others. They are looking for friends they can call for help when their tire is flat and people who will call and celebrate when they get a promotion. They want to walk through life with their friends. They have a need for people, and they show a deep desire for relational equity. In other words, they long to be deeply invested in others and have others deeply invested in them. They desire to be a major part of each other’s lives—the day-to-day, big and small “stuff of life.” They also think that others should be a part of the most important aspect of their lives—their spiritual journey.
2. **Depth** is important. Young adults want to be people of significance. Deep significance. They care about who they are and what they’re becoming—“ankle deep” doesn’t work for them. They told us that they’d rather be “in over their heads” in life as opposed to kicking around in

the shallow end. Young adults also have interest in addressing the hard-to-talk about topics. They appreciate tough questions and despise pat answers. Their responses indicate that they like wrestling with difficult things and chewing on challenging ideas. They express a high degree of interest in processing information, and they often find the questions more important than the answers.

3. **Responsibility** is strongly valued because young adults know their choices make a difference. Decisions are everywhere. Recycle. Buy or trade fair. Sponsor a child. Respect your elders. Tithe. Love your neighbors. Respond to the crisis in Darfur. These are the type of opportunities that define this generation. They affirmed the importance of these issues, and they are committed to doing the “right” thing even as they grow in their understanding of what right means. They’ve concluded that all of these decisions matter, and what matters most is how they respond.
4. **Connection** is the fourth area of importance. This could be called mentoring or intergenerational ministry. They want to learn from those who have already experienced the things they are about to face. They’re looking for a connection with people who will walk alongside them and advise them. They want a connection that gives them the opportunity to have someone pour their lives into them and teach them along their journey. And interestingly enough, they’re willing to do that for someone else too. (Stetzer, et al., 67-68)

These four markers of ministry, point to implications for developing faith formation and ministry with emerging adults. The young adults in the study, both churched and unchurched, expressed the following needs and interests:

- to interact with members of a group multiple times per week
- to participate in small group activities that promote relationships and belonging
- to connect with a mentor; to receive information and advice from individuals with experience
- to participate in Bible study that minimizes pat answers in the exploration of Scripture
- to participate in small group meetings to discuss life application of Scripture
- to determine their own beliefs through hands-on, practical learning experiences
- to utilize their talents and abilities through opportunities to meet needs
- to participate in hands-on outreach activities on a frequent basis that meet the needs of others
- to benefit others through global service projects

Based on their research with 149 churches that were reaching an extraordinary number of young adults, the research team found nine common characteristics in churches that are reaching young adults.

1. **Creating Deeper Community.** Churches that are effective at attracting and developing young adults place a high value on moving people into a healthy small group system. Young adults are trying to connect and will make a lasting connection wherever they can find belonging.
2. **Making a Difference through Service.** Churches that are transforming young adults value leading people to serve through volunteerism. More than being pampered, young adults want to be part of something bigger than themselves and are looking to be part of an organization where they can make a difference through acts of service.
3. **Experiencing Worship.** Churches that are engaging young adults are providing worship environments that reflect their culture while also revering and revealing God. More than

looking for a good performance, young adults desire to connect with a vertical experience of worship.

4. **Conversing the Content.** Churches that are led by authentic communicators are drawing young adults in the message. Though their styles vary from topic to exegetical, authentic communicators are true to their own personal style of communication and are usually more conversational than preachy.
5. **Leveraging Technology.** Churches that are reaching young adults are willing to communicate in a language of technology familiar to young adults. Young adults sense that these churches are welcoming churches that value and understand them, engaging them where they are.
6. **Building Cross-Generational Relationships.** Churches that are linking young adults with older, mature adults are challenging young adults to move on to maturity through friendship, wisdom, and support. Young adults are drawn to churches that believe in them enough to challenge them.
7. **Moving Toward Authenticity.** Churches that are engaging young adults are reaching them not only by their excellence but by their honesty. Young adults are looking for and connecting to churches where they see leaders that are authentic, transparent, and on a learning journey.
8. **Leading by Transparency.** Churches that are influencing young adults highly value an incarnational approach to ministry and leadership. This incarnational approach doesn't require revealing one's personal sin list so much as it does require that those in leadership must be willing to express a personal sense of humanity and vulnerability.
9. **Leading by Team.** Increasingly churches reaching young adults seem to be taking a team approach to ministry. They see ministry not as a solo venture but as a team sport—and the broader participation it creates increases the impact of the ministry. (Stetzer, et al., 143-44)

Young adults are longing for community and fellowship with peers, looking for ways to reach people in need, and circling the church but not always finding a home in it. Connection is the key. Community with other young adults is extremely important in their lives. Young adults seek authentic answers in the Bible and Christian tradition, best learned through participation in small group meetings. Making a difference is essential by having the opportunity to meet the needs of others on a regular basis. Social action is cited as the major reason uninvolved young adults would consider being part of a church.

Research Studies

Belzer, Tobin, Richard W. Flory, Nadia Roumani, and Brie Loskota. "Congregations That Get It:

Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation." *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*. James Heft, editor. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

Flory, Richard W. and Donald E. Miller. *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008.

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Part 3. Factors that Promote Faith Growth in the Baby Boom Generation

Are churches ready for the coming tsunami of aging Baby Boomers. In 2011 the first members of the Baby Boomer Generation turn sixty-five years old. In the United States today Americans over sixty-five now outnumber teenagers by nearly two to one. What used to be referred to as the “graying of America” is now understood to be a social revolution. Some thirty-nine million Americans, or 13% of the U.S. population, are ages sixty-five and older—up from 4% in 1900. By 2050, according to Pew Research projections, about *one-in-five* Americans will be over age sixty-five, and about 5% will be ages eighty-five and older, up from 2% now. Nearly every industry in society, from health care to entertainment, is scrambling to respond to this age wave that is crashing on our shores.

America is in the midst of a demographic revolution, but this revolution is about much more than longevity. It’s about the changing perspective of the Baby Boomers as they reach what was traditionally viewed as a time to enjoy the golden years. We are witnessing the emergence of a new stage of life between adult midlife—typically focused on career and child-rearing—and old age, traditionally marked by increasing frailty and decline. This new stage of life spans several decades and is characterized by generally good health, relative financial stability, and an active, engaged lifestyle.

Phyllis Moen, in her article “Midcourse: Navigating Retirement and a New Life Stage” writes, “[This is] the period in which individuals begin to think about, plan for, and actually disengage from their primary career occupations and the raising of children; develop new identities and new ways to be productively engaged; establish new patterns of relating to spouses, children, siblings, parents, friends; leave some existing relationships and begin new ones. As in adolescence, people in the midcourse years are thinking about and enacting role shifts that are both products of their past and precursors of their future life course.”

1. Perspectives & Practices for Ministry with Baby Boomers - Gary McIntosh

(Excerpts from: “Trends and Challenges for Ministry Among North American’s Largest Generation.” *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Vol. 5, No. 2, pages 300-303; <http://wisdom.biola.edu/cej>)

Gary McIntosh describes the Baby Boomer generation as educated, media-oriented, independent, cause-oriented, fitness conscious, activists, quality conscious, and questioning of authority. He says that as church members Boomers are (1) committed to relationships, rather than organizations; (2) want to belong, rather than join; (3) supportive of people, rather than programs; (4) long to live their faith, rather than talk about it; (5) wish to be seen as unique individuals, rather than a monolithic group; (6) desire to design their own programs, rather than attend ones developed for them; (7) yearn to serve others, rather than only being served; and (8) crave meaningful activity, rather than empty days. In this excerpt he describes how to approach faith formation with Baby Boomers.

Perspectives

I have followed the boomer generation since 1983, tracking the impact of their lifestyle, attitudes, and interests on general church ministry. Like others, I have noticed that Boomers have always made their own rules, and now they are redefining how to grow old. As Boomers reinvent old age, gerontologist Ken Dychwald says they “will age rebelliously.” And, as Boomers push the age profile of churches in the

United States higher, they are also demanding a different array of services than the same age group a generation ago. My observations lead me to conclude the following regarding aging Boomers.

First as Boomers age they continue to be different than the generation preceding them. Generational personality does not change much after the bulk of the generation reaches 30 years old, and Boomers are not likely to suddenly wake up and like older forms of ministry. Expect Boomers to ask why, tell it like it is, let it all hang out, prefer informal activities, like change and variety, think the system is the problem, be cause-oriented, desire to experience life, and have a low view of institutions. In short, expect Boomers to act and think much like they always have, except with more maturity.

Second, as Boomers age, they are offended by “old” stereotypes. They like to be characterized by the following words: active, alert, contributor, experienced, healthy, independent, and worker. Most Boomers think of themselves as 10-15 years younger than they actually are. They dislike being labeled “senior citizens,” “old,” or “retired.” In short, expect Boomers to be turned off by any ministry that portrays them as frail, aged, or sedentary.

Third, as Boomers age they aspire to be unique individuals. They want to be part of the decision-making for any ministry that they are expected to attend and will not respond to a program that is developed for them without their input. They resist the “poor dear syndrome” and senior discounts. In their way of thinking, a 10% discount means they are 10% depreciated. Boomers never wished to wear fashions that made them look mature, and they continue to appreciate the music of their youth. Any church ministry that is designed for their parents will not attract aging Boomers. They are attracted to ministries that help them look back with pride to their youth, while helping them launch the next chapter in their lives. To be successful, ministry to Boomers must appear youthful, healthy, vibrant, and worthy of their time and energy.

Fourth, as Boomers age they continue to search for the next new adventure. Whether it is short-term mission trips or ski outings, older boomer still look for new experiences. Most recently, they have made sports utility vehicles extremely popular. It is true that they rarely drive them off the road, but they have an adventure from their driveway to the grocery store and back. In short, they are attracted to church ministry that is challenging and adventuresome.

Fifth, as Boomers age, they continue to accelerate their careers. Boomers are changing their lifestyles but staying involved in the work force. They are buying vacation and second homes, as well as enlarging their nests to include home offices and fitness centers. While churches continue to offer noontime luncheon meetings for seniors, working Boomers cannot come due to their jobs. In a word, aging Boomers are attracted to ministries that are high quality and make allowances for their work schedules.

Sixth, as Boomers age, they continue to search for spiritual meaning. While Boomers have always demonstrated a “spiritual” bent, whether in a mystical or a traditional religious sense, throughout most of their lives many Boomers have simply ignored the church. However, it is now apparent that age Boomers struggle with the same spiritual, emotional, and life-stage issues with which previous generations have wrestled. All the instincts of the baby Boomers are saying, “Slow down. Figure out what’s important.” They are attracted to church ministries that speak clearly and specifically to their concerns, and ones that make a difference in their lives.

Seventh, as Boomers age, they continue to break the rules. Boomers have always challenged the status quo, and they are doing so as they reinvent themselves today. Aging Boomers will need room to re-frame traditional seniors’ ministry to fit their own needs and desires.

Practices

As church leaders think through the challenges and opportunities present by the aging boomer generation, I believe they should consider trying to do the following:

1. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **adventurous**. Rather than mall walking, consider hiking in the mountains, cross-country skiing, or snowshoeing. Remember: Boomers have always seen themselves as a youthful generation, and they still do!
2. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **fun**. Rather than potluck luncheons, consider catered parties, fishing trips, paint ball competitions, and team-building camps. Remember: Boomers are not looking for a seniors' ministry; they are seeking an older youth ministry.
3. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **significant**. Rather than being served, consider serving others by building a home for Habitat for Humanity, assisting missionaries, helping out-of-work people to find a job, or tutoring children. Remember: Boomers desire to make a difference in the world by taking on great causes.
4. Build a ministry for Boomers that is **educational**. Along with Bible studies, consider CPR, basic first aid, personal health, managing finances, and public speaking classes. Remember: Boomers are an educated generation, and they wish to continue learning to the end of their days.
5. Building a ministry for Boomers that is **spiritual**. Rather than offering simplistic formulas, consider prayer walks in the neighborhood, intercession teams, and a variety of small group sharing. Remember: Boomers are a mosaic of sub-groups, and it will take a multi-dimensional approach to spiritual formation to reach them.

There are three approaches we can take with aging Boomers. One, we can simply write off Boomers and focus on the emerging generations. Two, we can try to reach and keep Boomers with ministries that currently exist and are popular with the oldest generation. Or, three, we can scrap our conventional thinking about seniors' ministry and start from scratch, building a new ministry that is fruitful in reaching and keeping aging Boomers. For churches that desire to be fruitful, my advice is to choose the third option.

2. Three Components of Ministry with Baby Boomers - Amy Hanson

(Excerpts from *Baby Boomers and Beyond: Tapping the Ministry Talents and Passions of Adults Over Fifty*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2010.)

Amy Hanson, in Baby Boomers and Beyond, proposes three essential components for creative ministries with maximum impact on Baby Boomers: 1) service, 2) spiritual growth, and 3) intergenerational relationships.

Service

Boomers want to do something interesting and challenging. They are ready to jump into a worthwhile cause where they feel that can make a significant difference. Boomers want service opportunities that have a mission. They want to do things that give their lives purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. They want to know their contributions truly matter. There is no greater mission for Boomers to immerse themselves in than the mission of Christ to redeem and heal a broken world. Encourage Boomers to serve in an area where they've always had an interest, and provide them with exposure to a variety of service opportunities. Short term trips can be a great way for people over fifty to discover the one thing they

want to invest themselves in. Show Boomers how they might use their past work experiences as tools for service. Help them tap into their passion.

Engaging Boomers to make a major impact for Christ in the world should be a primary foundation for ministry with Boomers—if not *the* primary foundation. We have an open window of time right now to help individuals refocus their priorities and recognize how God wants to use them for his purposes in this season of their lives. (Hanson, 143)

Spiritual Growth

There are several fundamental resources why Boomers are responsive to the message of the gospel and to spiritual growth. Later Adulthood is a season of significant life transitions and people are more responsive to religion. A second reason is Boomers quest to find meaning and purpose in life as they enter the second half of life and evaluate the things that really provide lasting fulfillment. A third reason adults are open to faith and spiritual growth is their desire for meaningful relationships. The church can be a primary place of social interaction where people can connect with one another and talk about life issues. “All three factors—help dealing with life’s changes, a search for purpose, and a desire for meaningful relationships—can powerfully work together in drawing adults to Christ’s saving grace. (Hanson, 151) Effective ways to bring older adults into a relationship with Christ include: (1) small group faith formation, (2) hanging out in the places where Boomer adults gather, (3) hosting events that appeal to Boomer’s interests and needs, and (4) service opportunities.

Intergenerational Relationships

Ministry with Baby Boomers includes an intergenerational component. Developing intergenerational relationships is one of the best ways to break age-related stereotypes, to share faith across generations, and to help the church become more unified. There are a variety of ways to connect the generations and develop intergenerational relationships: (1) encourage generations to serve together on a worthy cause; (2) form groups according to similar interests rather than age; (3) encourage adults to intentionally pray for young people and vice versa; (4) host strategic intergenerational events that are fun for all, have ready-made questions that permit age groups to engage easily in conversation, and encourage relationships to continue after the event is over; (6) ask adults to tell their stories, at workshop or events or programs, and capture them on video and/or in print; (7) develop intergenerational small group and large group programming; (8) integrate all ages in Sunday worship; and (9) educate people as to the uniqueness of each generation.

As multiple generations work, worship, serve, and play together, the result will be that people lay down their own self-centeredness and take up the attitude of Christ. True, we may have to do church a little differently, but when all ages are regularly interacting and loving one another, God is honored, and we become an example to our hurting world. (Hanson, 185)

4. Keys to Baby Boomer Faith Formation: Variety & Choice

We know from research that adult learners will chose the learning activity that best fits their learning needs, preferred modes of learning, and time constraints. In order to accomplish this, faith formation with Baby Boomers needs to provide a variety of content and learning activities, and a variety of models for faith formation that include activities in physical places and virtual spaces.

A Variety of Models

Six models that should be part of adult faith formation offerings for Baby Boomers include:

1. **Faith Formation on Your Own:** through reading, online courses, audio and video programs, movies, television programs
2. **Faith Formation at Home:** through Bible reading, storytelling and caring conversation, prayer and devotions, rituals and traditions, service
3. **Faith Formation in Small Groups:** through Bible and theology study groups, social issues study groups, faith sharing groups, lectionary-based groups, service/mission action groups, support groups, special interest groups
4. **Faith Formation in Large Groups:** through courses, speaker series, workshops, film festivals, retreats, conferences, intergenerational programs
5. **Faith Formation in the Congregation:** through Sunday worship, church year events and celebrations, service/mission activities, ministry and leadership in the church and community
6. **Faith Formation in the Community and World:** through programs, courses, clinics, workshops, and presentations at universities, retreat centers, YMCAs, libraries, bookstores, regional church programs; through engagement in community/political action, local and global service and justice projects

A Variety of Settings: Face-to-Face & Online

Adult faith formation includes learning activities in physical places and virtual spaces, blending face-to-face, interactive learning with virtual, online learning. Online websites, social networking services, and digital technologies (e.g., an iPod Touch, smart cell phones) mean that churches can deliver faith formation experiences and resources anytime and anywhere, reaching people wherever they go online (home, work, school, vacation, coffee house). The interplay between learning in physical places, face-to-face, and virtual online spaces can revolutionize adult faith formation in a church.

Suggestions & Ideas for Baby Boomer Faith Formation

1. Develop a Lifelong Learning Institute at your church or as a collaborative effort among churches in your community.

Baby Boomers are looking for stimulating learning experiences that run the gamut of topics and interests. Imagine your church (or a group of local churches) as a “college” where courses and learning events are offered throughout the week—daytime, evenings, weekends—on campus and out in the community/world.

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes can serve as a model for establishing an institute for adults 50 or older. Osher Institutes are found on the campuses of 118 colleges and universities from Maine to Hawaii and Alaska. Each provides a distinctive array of non-credit courses and activities specifically developed for adults aged 50 or older who are interested in learning for the joy of learning.

For example the University of Dayton Osher Institute offers courses in art, current events, health and fitness, history, literature, music, religion and science. A curriculum committee selects courses on the basis of member requests, the expertise of moderators, variety, and balance. Moderators include University of Dayton professors and community professionals who lead peer-to-peer informal discussion seminars that meet once a week for two hours, for four to eight weeks. The summer session is two one-

day sessions. At Duke University the Osher Institute utilizes a mix of peer teachers, Duke professors, graduate students, independent scholars, and community experts.

Your church(s) can develop courses and learning activities around the interests of Baby Boomers, as well as around the expertise of teachers/leaders in your church and community. Topics which emerged from the survey of research in this journal issue included:

- personal finances and financial security,
- physical health and exercise
- personal interests (e.g., hobbies, dance, writing, arts)
- travel and new adventures
- family relationships and responsibilities (e.g., caring for an older parent),
- spiritual health (meaning and purpose in life, deepening and strengthening relationship with God)
- changing living situations
- multiple life transitions

Courses at the Duke University Osher Lifelong Learning Institute cover a wide range of topics and interests: art and architecture, hands-on art, computer programs, culture and social sciences, economic/financial issues and retirement issues, health and wellness, history and current affairs, literature, language and drama, natural science and technology, performing arts, religion and philosophy, and writing.

Ginghamsburg Church in Tipp City, OH takes a similar “institute” approach, offering courses and learning activities throughout the week on a wide variety of topics and interests. The Winter/Spring 2011 courses include: Encountering the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; A Study of David: Anointed, Transformed, Redeemed; Crown Financial Study and Financial Peace University; Secrets of a Prayer Warrior; A Follower’s Life; Boundaries (relationship course); Forgive for Good; Ministry by Strengths; Love is a Choice: Letting Go of Unhealthy Relationships; C.L.A.R.I.T.Y. in Communications; Christian 12-Step; GriefShare; Zumba with Toning; Insanely Fit; Healthy Cooking Class; Yoga Café; Yoga/Pilates Fusion; Quilting Group; and Basic Car Maintenance.

For More Resources and Examples

- Osher Lifelong Learning Institute: <http://usm.maine.edu/olli/national>
- Aquinas College: www.aquinas.edu/olli
- Duke University: www.learnmore.duke.edu/olli
- Ginghamsburg Adult Faith Formation: <http://ginghamsburg.org/adult>
- Santa Clara University: www.scu.edu/osher
- University of Dayton: <http://artsscience2.udayton.edu/continuingeducation/udlli.asp>

2. Utilize online resources to develop programs and activities in a variety of faith formation models.

Online learning resources continue to increase dramatically. Many of these resources are free and can be used in a variety of faith formation models: on your own, at home, in small groups, and in large groups. Here are two examples of the rich resources online.

Ted Talks

TED is a small nonprofit devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading. It started out (in 1984) as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: Technology, Entertainment, Design. Since then its scope has become ever broader. The annual TED conferences bring together the world's most fascinating thinkers and doers, who are challenged to give the talk of their lives (in 18 minutes). The TED website has been developed around TEDTalks, with the goal of giving everyone on-demand access to the world's most inspiring voices. There are more than 700 TEDTalks now available.

Website: www.ted.com/index.php/talks

iTunes University

iTunes University, part of the iTunes Store, is possibly the world's greatest collection of free educational media available to lifelong learners. With more than 350,000 free lectures, videos, films, and other resources—from all over the world, iTunes U has become the engine for the mobile learning movement. Almost 400 universities—including Stanford, Yale, MIT, Oxford, and UC Berkeley—distribute their content publicly on the iTunes Store. In the Beyond Campus section of iTunes U, people can access a wealth of content from distinguished entities such as MoMA, the New York Public Library, Public Radio International, and PBS stations.

Website: www.apple.com/education/itunes-u

3. Offer a variety of justice and service involvements for Baby Boomers.

Churches can respond to Boomers' interest (and increasing time availability) to address social issues and their willingness to make their community and world a better place by offering a variety of age-specific and intergenerational projects that are geared to different levels of involvement and challenge, such as:

- local mission projects lasting anywhere from a few hours to one day in length
- short-term mission trips lasting anywhere from two to five days and requiring an overnight stay on location
- weeklong mission trips within the United States as well as to foreign countries, designed for those who are ready to take the next big step in service
- global expedition trips of ten to fourteen days that provide the opportunity to be immersed for a longer period in the targeted community and culture
- personalized small group mission trips, organized around the interests and time of the group

Utilize existing projects and organizations—locally, nationally, and globally—to offer a variety of involvements. Develop an annual “catalog” of service/mission opportunities. For an example of this approach go to Ginghamburg Church Adult Global Missions: <http://ginghamsburg.org/missions>.

Churches can also develop small groups that combine the study of justice and social issues with experiential hands-on action projects. Groups can be organized around issues or themes. One example of a small group program that weaves study, small group learning, retreat experiences, and action projects is *JustFaith* (www.justfaith.org). *JustFaith* is a thirty-week justice formation and transformation process that focuses on discipleship—engagement in the life of Jesus—and the call to be about God's dream of justice and compassion in a world scarred by the domestic and global crisis called poverty. Meeting weekly, small groups of 10–15 people employ books, videos, discussion, prayer, retreats and hands-on experiences. Opening and closing retreats are part of the commitment each participant makes to the group. Four immersion experiences provide face-to-face contact with people living on the margins of society, and include social analysis and spiritual/theological reflection.

4. Develop faith formation around Baby Boomer milestones and life transitions.

Faith formation with Baby Boomers (adults currently in their 50s and 60s) can be developed around their many life transitions or “trigger events” as Richard Leider calls them (see the “Discovering What Really Matters” article in the survey of research reports for more information.) The most significant life transitions in the 50s and 60s include:

- starting a new job
- losing a job
- child beginning college
- child graduating from college
- adult child moving back home
- child getting married
- birth or adoption of a grandchild
- caregiving for a grandchild
- surviving a major illness/accident
- death of someone close
- caregiving for an elderly relative
- retirement
- selling the “family home”
- relocating to a new home

Churches can develop faith formation around these significant life transitions or milestones by creating:

1. a ritual celebration or a blessing marking the milestone with the whole church community
2. a home ritual celebration or blessing marking the milestone
3. a learning program—often for the whole family or community—that prepares the individual for the milestone
4. a tangible, visible reminder or symbol of the milestone being marked
5. resources for pastoral care and for continuing faith growth after the milestone experience

Resources

Hater, Robert. *Journeys of Discovering*. New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2009.

Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation. Bloomington: Vibrant Faith Ministries, 2007.
(www.vibrantfaith.org)

5. Develop spiritual formation focused on “spirituality for the second half of life.”

As Baby Boomers enter the second half of life, churches can respond by helping them explore spirituality from a new perspective. A resource such as Richard Rohr’s *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2011) can provide content for a variety of programs and activities, including a course, a retreat program, small group study, etc.

Churches can respond to the hunger for growing in relationship and intimacy with God and exploring more deeply the life of the Spirit by providing formation in spiritual disciplines and practices for the second half of life. Churches can offer educational programs, retreat experiences, spiritual guides who serve as mentors on the spiritual journey, and resources on the spiritual disciplines and practices. Churches can also equip Baby Boomers to serve as spiritual mentors and guides for other ages.

Churches can assist Baby Boomers in (re)discovering and experiencing spiritual practices such as Lectio Divina, Scripture reflection, spiritual reading, contemplation, fixed-hour prayer, the examen, solitude and silence, Sabbath, praying with art and music, discernment, fasting, and prayer styles and traditions.

Spiritual formation in small groups provides a flexible way to explore and experience the spiritual practices and disciplines, and apply them to daily life. Offer small groups in a variety settings (church, home, coffee shop), times, and lengths suited to people's lifestyles. Offer a variety of content topics such as "Spiritual Disciplines Bible Study Groups" focused on the core spiritual practices in the Bible (see *Spiritual Disciplines Companion: Bible Studies and Practices to Transform Your Soul* by Jan Johnson); and small groups focused on a single spiritual practice, such as Sabbath, prayer, contemplation, fasting, Scripture reflection, pilgrimage, discernment, and liturgical year.

Set aside a prayer room stocked with resources about prayer and spiritual practices and connect people to online spiritual formation and prayer resources, as well as to online communities that nurture spiritual formation.

A Sampling of Spiritual Formation Resources

Ancient Christian Practices Series (Thomas Nelson)

- Allender, Dan. *Sabbath*.
- Benson, Robert. *In Constant Prayer*
- Chittister, Joan. *The Liturgical Year*.
- Gallagher, Nora. *The Sacred Meal*.
- McLaren, Brian. *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*.
- McKnight, Scott. *Fasting*.

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Sacred Rhythm: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006.

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005.

Caliguire, Mindy. *Discovering Soul Care, Spiritual Friendship, Simplicity, and Soul Searching*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007-2008.

Dawson, Gerrit Scott, Adele J. González, E. Glenn Hinson, Rueben P. Job, Marjorie J. Thompson, and Wendy M. Wright. *Companions in Christ: A Small-Group Experience in Spiritual Formation*. Revised Edition. Nashville: Upper Room, 2006.

Foster, Richard. *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008.

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. 20th Anniversary Issue. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998.

Johnson, Jan. *Spiritual Disciplines Companion: Bible Studies and Practices to Transform Your Soul*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009.

Redmont, Jane. *When in Doubt, Sing: Prayer in Daily Life*. Jane Redmont. Notre Dame: Sorin, 2008.

Rhodes, Tricia McCary. *Sacred Chaos: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life You Have*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008.

Rupp, Joyce. *Prayer*. Joyce Rupp. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007.

Thompson, Marjorie. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Westminster/John Knox, 2005.

Wicks, Robert. *Prayerfulness: Awakening to the Fullness of Life*. Notre Dame: Sorin, 2009.

Wolpert, Daniel. *Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices*. Nashville: Upper Room, 2003.

5. Connect Baby Boomers with the other generations in the congregation through intergenerational events, programs, and relationships.

Churches can connect Baby Boomers to other generations in a variety of ways. Here are several suggestions.

1. Offer simple, one-time opportunities for Baby Boomers and the younger generations to get to know each other: social events, service projects, or educational experiences. Make a concerted effort to invite people from all generations to plan and participate in the activities.
2. Encourage Boomers to share their faith journey, beliefs, and values with young people. Invite young people to share their stories, too.
3. Link people of different generations (older-to-younger or younger-to-older) in the church who have insights and life experiences that may be helpful to the other, such as Boomers helping young adults and new parents with money management and household management, or young people helping Boomers navigate the online world.
4. Structure age-group programs with an intergenerational connection, such as an educational program that includes interviews, a panel, and/or storytelling with people of different ages.
5. Incorporate intergenerational dialogues into programming—opportunities for the generations to experience the wisdom, faith, and interests of other generations through presentations, performances, and discussions.
6. Develop mentoring relationships between youth and Baby Boomers, such as prayer partners, learning-to-pray spiritual direction, service involvement, and Confirmation mentors.
7. Design intergenerational service programs (or redesign existing programs) that accommodate the needs and interests of all generations.
8. Sponsor music and art projects such as a community concert where musicians of all ages perform together, or an intergenerational art exchange or exhibit, or an Advent or Lent music festival.
9. Organize social-recreational activities, such as an intergenerational Olympics or a Wednesday night simple meal and Bible study during Lent.
10. Offer intergenerational learning programs throughout the year that involve all generations in learning, relationships building, faith sharing, prayer and celebrating.

(For more insights and ideas about connecting the generations see the Spring 2009 (Volume 3.1) issue of *Lifelong Faith*—“Generations Learning Together.”)

Sticky Faith presented by Fuller Youth Institute

The Church Sticking Together

The Vital Role of Intergenerational Relationships in Fostering Sticky Faith

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Wouldn't it be great to find the youth ministry silver bullet?

Neither of us has seen (or used) an actual silver bullet. In our culture today, the silver bullet has become synonymous for a sure thing.

The problem is, sure things in youth ministry are rare. Programs come and go, as do communication channels and strategies for reaching kids on the margins. Who would have guessed the power of online social media a few years back or the number of middle schoolers in our groups who use smart phones?

While sure things are rare, one phenomenon that is not as rare as we would hope is students leaving the faith after they graduate from our youth ministries. As we have examined other research, our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who are connected to a youth group when they graduate high school will fail to stick with their faith in college. [1 \(#fn-1-a\)](#)

Let's translate that statistic to the kids in your youth ministry.

Imagine the seniors in your youth ministry standing in a line and facing you. Now, imagine that you ask them to count off by twos, just like you used to do on the playground to divide into teams. The ones will stick with their faith; the twos will shelve it.

In an effort to understand this drop off as well as give youth leaders, churches and families tools they need to help kids develop more lasting faith, we at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) launched the College Transition Project. As we were planning our College Transition Project six years ago, [2 \(#fn-2-a\)](#) our FYI research team hoped to find *one thing* that youth workers could do that would be the silver bullet for sticky faith; the one thing that would develop long-term faith in students. We hoped to find one element of youth ministry programming (e.g., small groups, mentoring, justice work) that would be significantly related to higher faith maturity in students. This silver bullet would launch our high school graduates on a journey of faith that would help them not only survive but thrive across the transition to college and life beyond.

We haven't found that silver bullet. While small groups, mentoring, justice work, leadership and a host of other youth ministry programs are important, the reality is that kids, ministry programs and spiritual development are

far more complex than that.

Intergenerational Stickiness

It turns out that intergenerational relationships are one key to building lasting faith in students. Silver bullet? No. Helpful if we want students to live their faith beyond high school? Absolutely.

Sadly, many high school students lack these significant relationships. In our effort to offer relevant and developmentally appropriate teaching and fellowship for teenagers, we have segregated (and we use that verb intentionally but not lightly) students from the rest of the church. In interviews and open-ended survey questions, participants shared reflections like this one: “The students seemed to be very separated from the rest of the congregation. Maybe fixing that gap would help unite the church.”

That segregation causes students to shelve their faith. Our study of nearly 500 youth group graduates from around the country has revealed the following important insights about the power of intergenerational relationships in building sticky faith:

Intergenerational Insight #1: *Involvement in all-church worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation.*

The closest our research has come to that definitive silver bullet is this sticky finding: High school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity. Of the many youth group participation variables we examined, involvement in intergenerational worship and relationships had one of the most robust correlations with faith maturity. This is true for our students’ senior year of high school and their freshman year of college.

Intergenerational Insight #2: *The more students serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick.*

Granted, some of your teenagers opt to serve in children’s ministry because they want to avoid going to the regular service. And sure, others volunteer because their schools require service hours.

Yet, even in the midst of these mixed motives, the high school students we surveyed who served in middle school or children’s ministry seemed to have stickier faith in college. Part of that is probably due to the type of student who is likely to volunteer to serve younger children, but nonetheless, more than just babysitting, being involved in children’s ministry seems to be faith building.

Intergenerational Insight #3: *High school seniors don’t feel supported by adults in their congregations.*

As a research team, we weren’t all that surprised that, of five major sources of support (adults in the congregation, parents, youth workers, friends in youth group and friends outside youth group), high school seniors ranked adults in the congregation last.

What did surprise us was how far behind they were the other four groups. One graduate reported that his church “would talk about having students involved, but they never really did.” Another reflected that church members “wanted nothing to do with us... I think they see us as kind of scary in that we’re the people on the news, you know, who are dealing drugs and getting pregnant and all those sort of things...keeping us separate and treating us like we were a hazard.”

Intergenerational Insight #4: *By far, the number-one way that churches made the teens in our survey feel*

welcomed and valued was when adults in the congregation showed interest in them.

More than any single program or event, kids were far more likely to feel like a significant part of their local churches when adults made the effort to get to know them. One student beamed as he said, “We were welcomed not just in youth group; we were welcomed into other parts of the ministry of the church: the worship team on Sunday mornings, teaching Sunday school to kids and helping with cleaning and serving. All these other types of things really just brought the youth in and made them feel like they had a place and even feel like they were valued as individuals.”

Becoming a 5:1 Church

One of the goals we give churches that want to take sticky faith seriously is to reconsider the traditional 5:1 ratio. **3 (#fn-3-a)** Many youth ministries say they want to have a 1:7 ratio of adults to kids on their winter retreats (meaning they want one adult for every seven kids), or a 1:5 ratio of adults to kids for their small groups. But what if we reversed that? What if we said we want a 5:1 adult-to-kid ratio in our youth ministries?

Before you panic because you think you’re now supposed to recruit five small-group leaders for every one kid and you’re already having a hard enough time recruiting one adult for every five kids, please relax. We’re not talking about five small-group leaders. We’re talking about five adults who are willing to commit to investing in one teenager in little, medium and big ways. Here’s how we have seen churches embrace 5:1 through a variety of creative paths.

Put a 5:1 Twist on Existing Programs

The good news is that, as you intentionally move your programs toward 5:1, you don’t have to start from scratch. Your youth ministry and your church already host events that, with some careful planning, could easily become more intergenerational. Consider these possibilities:

- Invite an adult Sunday school class to join your students on their next mission trip.
- Reshape your youth baptism service into an all-church baptism service.
- Invite students’ parents to your fall kick-off and prime your volunteers to invest relational time not only in students but parents too. • Encourage your high school guys’ small groups to attend annual men’s events (crawfish boil, steak fry, chili cook-off, whatever your church does).
- Ask your women’s ministries if their upcoming events (like Saturday teas or ladies’ outings) can be geared for teenage and younger girls too.
- Ask if your senior adult ministry would be open to pairing up with teenagers for the next food pantry program.

The bottom line is that, if you plan ahead, you can capitalize on momentum from existing events instead of starting them all from scratch. Whenever possible, invite the larger church body to get on board with your 5:1 vision, and explain that the goal is to build lasting faith in students.

5:1 Teaching

If you’re serious about sticky intergenerational relationships, you probably will need to launch a few new catalysts for 5:1. One excellent opportunity for new 5:1 dialogue is your Sunday teaching. Odds are good that you’ve got adults and kids sitting in Sunday school rooms, separated only by a few walls (and, as a youth worker, you hope

those walls have really good sound insulation). What if you periodically removed those walls and invited kids and adults to experience God's Word together?

5:1 Worship

We've heard from many innovative churches about how they are involving students in congregational worship—often after many years of segregated Sunday programming. A few churches have even canceled Sunday morning youth ministry in order to bring generations together in worship.

A church from St. Louis we dialogued with recently wants adults and kids to experience the same worship service every week, yet they also want to make sure their teenagers feel connected to their peers. So, every Sunday after the intergenerational worship service ends, the high school students meet for 30-45 minutes to talk about how to live out the sermon that next week at school. That way, students know they'll have a focused, lively conversation every week with their friends.

In an effort to bring a sticky intergenerational flavor to their morning worship, one Denver church decided to make their youth choir the choir for the main Sunday morning service. They were initially concerned that the service would shrink down to teenagers and their parents, but the opposite happened. Their 11:00 worship service became one of the most popular services. Adults who had invested in those kids throughout their childhood and adolescent years couldn't wait to have the teenagers lead them in music worship.

We're not advocating that churches cancel their Sunday youth groups or disband their adult choirs. Churches must do what they feel is appropriate for their own contexts. Every church should ask the simple question, "How can we increase adult-teen interaction during worship?"

5:1 Mentoring

Many churches include mentoring in their 5:1 paths. Through these empowering relationships, students are able to spend intentional time with adults who can impact and shape their spiritual journeys. The more adult mentors who seek out students and help them apply faith to daily life, the better. Among 13 different ways adults support high school kids, two variables stood out as significantly related to sticky faith over time: feeling sought out by adults and feeling like those adults "helped me to realistically apply my faith to my daily life." [4 \(#fn-4-a\)](#) Especially as we wrestle with how to train our staff and adult volunteers, helping kids connect the dots between their faith and their everyday lives should take priority if we're looking for long-term impact.

On one all-church retreat we heard about, participants were encouraged to find one person from a different age group and strike up a conversation. Participants were challenged to keep this conversation going once a week for six weeks. Carlos, a ninth grader, and Belinda, his grandmother's age, connected on that retreat and committed to the six-week trial. Six months later, they still get together to talk regularly.

Some youth leaders, realizing that the adults in their congregation are too busy to meet regularly with a teenager, have offered less intensive 5:1 connections. One church in our Sticky Faith Learning Cohort in Pasadena is asking adults for a few hours per year to connect with a kid based on a mutual interest, such as gardening, cooking or auto repair. Another Texas church in our cohort identified members who could meet weekly with graduating seniors for a few months. That limited time commitment created great success in connecting youth group students with innovative and godly congregation members of all ages.

Another church in our learning cohort has decided that they are already a multigenerational congregation—everyone gathers together in the same space at the same time. But they aren't satisfied with being multigenerational. They want to truly become *intergenerational*, focusing their worship, budget, priorities and

language around what it means to connect with one another in mutuality across age groups. One practical way they are addressing this shift is changing the way they talk about mentoring. They've determined that mentor/mentee language can be a hindrance because it implies a multigenerational, top-down relationship. The kind of 5:1 relationships they hope to foster are rooted in mutual influence, where old and young shape one another in profound ways.

5:1 Rituals

San Clemente Presbyterian Church had already embraced the importance of intergenerational relationships before FYI started our research. As a result, while other churches are taking 5:1 baby steps, they are sprinting ahead.

When students graduate from sixth grade, they're presented with a Bible with inscriptions from their parents and other friends of the family. When those same students enter junior high, they are taken on a confirmation retreat and officially become members of the San Clemente body.

At the beginning of their senior year of high school, students hike to the top of Half Dome in Yosemite with the youth pastor, the youth ministry volunteers and the senior pastor. According to Dr. Tod Bolsinger, the senior pastor, "This tradition is so important, I have parents of elementary-age children telling me to keep in shape so I can take their children on this rite of passage hiking experience." [5 \(#fn-5-a\)](#)

[http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/2009/02/a-church-in-the-intergenerational-hov-lane/.](http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/2009/02/a-church-in-the-intergenerational-hov-lane/)]]

At the end of their senior year, the church hosts a blessing ceremony for all high school students, graduating seniors, parents and congregation members. These sorts of annual rituals shape both the DNA of the church as well as the sticky faith of the students.

The Role of Parents in 5:1

When we speak with groups of parents about 5:1, we often feel them look in the direction of their youth pastors, as if it's the leaders' job to build a 5:1 web for their kids. However, parents should assume the primary responsibility for linking their kids with five or more caring adults. The youth worker's role is to come alongside parents as partners in the process, only taking the lead when parents aren't able to create the needed 5:1 strands. A few months ago I (Kara) met a single mom who understood that she was ultimately responsible for surrounding her son with loving adults, especially men who could fill the void created by his absent father. This mom had a brilliant idea for helping her son visualize their family's sticky web. In the hallway between their bedrooms, this mom has hung a few large collage picture frames, each of which has several openings for pictures. As her son builds a relationship with an adult—especially with a man—she takes a picture of her son with that adult. Then she places those pictures in her frames to remind them of the amazing adults already surrounding their family. The blank picture frames that are yet unfilled reinforce that there are more enriching 5:1 relationships still to come.

Help parents connect the dots between their kids' faith and the influence their kids' coaches, teachers and neighbors have on them from week to week. When we meet with our own kids' teachers for parent-teacher conferences, we now share our vision for bringing adults around our kids to help them flourish in all of life and ask how we can support their roles within that web. Another parent told us that she has committed to gather the parents of all the kids in her son's small group at the beginning of each school year for a barbecue. She wants to encourage them to pray together for their kids and to begin to look for ways to invite each other into the circles of influence around their kids.

From Silver Bullets to Red Rover

Building sticky faith into your students is a complex process. But as students are released into a web of relationships where they are shaped and changed by the lives of the people in your congregation, research shows encouraging signs that this helps faith stick. Think of your 5:1 strategy like a targeted Red Rover game, where you exercise your passion as a youth leader to call upon adults you know and trust to enter the very high calling of shaping the life of a student. No silver bullet. No magic wand. Just living out Jesus' call to make disciples.

footnotes:

1. In September 2006, the Barna Group released their observation that “the most potent data regarding disengagement is that a majority of twentysomethings—61 percent of today’s young adults—had been churchied at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged” (Barna Update, “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” The Barna Group, September 16, 2006). According to a Gallup Poll, approximately 40 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds who attended church at age sixteen or seventeen are no longer attending (George H. Gallup, Jr. “The Religiosity Cycle,” The Gallup Poll, October 19, 2006. Frank Newport, “A Look at Religious Switching in America Today,” The Gallup Poll, October 19, 2006. A 2007 survey by LifeWay Research of over one thousand adults ages eighteen to thirty who spent a year or more in youth group during high school suggests that more than 65 percent of young adults who attend a Protestant church for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. (LifeWay, “LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church,” LifeWay Christian Resources, <http://www.lifeway.com/article/165949/> (<http://www.lifeway.com/article/165949/>)). In this study, respondents were not necessarily those who had graduated from youth group as seniors. In addition, the research design did not factor in parachurch or on-campus faith communities in their definition of college “church” attendance. Data from the National Study of Youth and Religion published in 2009 indicate an approximate 30 percent drop in frequent religious service attendance across multiple Protestant denominations. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009]). Fuller Youth Institute’s estimate that 40 to 50 percent of high school graduates will fail to stick with their faith is based on a compilation of data from these various studies. ↩ (#ref-1-a)
2. The College Transition Project is a culmination of six years of study of 500 youth group students as they transition into college, including two three-year longitudinal studies and two interview studies. The goals of this research are to offer help to parents, leaders and churches in building a faith that lasts, or “sticky faith.” See our [About](http://stickyfaith.org/about-sticky-faith) (<http://stickyfaith.org/about-sticky-faith>) page for more details. ↩ (#ref-2-a)
3. This vision was inspired by the research of our friend and colleague Chap Clark. ↩ (#ref-3-a)
4. Note that these weren’t just what students chose as most important to them but what seemed to have the strongest connection to the faith variables in our survey. Erika C. Knuth, *Intergenerational connections and faith development in late adolescence*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, Graduate School of Psychology, 2010). ↩ (#ref-4-a)
5. See David Frazee, “A Church in the Intergenerational HOV Lane,” FYI E-Journal, February 2, 2009, (<http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/2009/02/a-church-in-the-intergenerational-hov-lane/>). ↩ (#ref-5-a)

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