



The Importance of Congregational Culture for Lifelong Faith Formation

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The most striking finding in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry,” as reported in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, was the role that congregational culture plays in nurturing the faith of young people and in the effectiveness of the church’s youth ministry. The focus of the study was on the processes that contributed to developing committed Christian young people, but the findings on the importance of congregational faith and family/household faith can be applied to faith formation across the life span.

While confirming the power of several well known youth ministry practices, the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” pointed to a congregational culture of the Spirit—something more basic and central in establishing vital faith in children, youth, and adults (as evidenced by the survey results from the parents of young people). The research points to the value of a congregation’s culture endowed with a sense of the living, active presence of God at work among 1) the people of the whole congregation, 2) the ministries of the congregation,

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3) the age-group ministries, 4) the adults (parents), and 5) congregational leadership, 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 and adults (parents).

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 people of all ages to discipleship, witness and service. From these shared beliefs and commitments flow the practices of ministry.

What Is Congregational Culture?

A dictionary would define *culture* as the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguish one group of people from another. Its root meaning is shared with the word *agriculture*, referring to the soil that has been tilled and by extension a set of traits that have been plowed into a group's way of life. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art.

In *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out*, Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro write, "The idea of church culture is often ignored, in part because so little material is available about it. Yet we believe *culture is to the church what a soul is to the human body*. It is an overall life force that the Holy Spirit uses to give energy,

personality, and uniqueness to everything a body of believers says and does." (xxi) Church culture influences everything you do. It colors the way you choose and introduce programs. It shapes how you select and train leaders. "Your culture is the lens through which you view your life. If you change the lens, you change your outlook. Changing the culture, and everything else changes, including the future." (xxi)

Nancy T. Ammerman, professor of sociology at Boston University, has researched and written extensively about American congregations and the role of congregational culture. In her essay "Culture and Identity in the Congregation," she explains what a congregational culture is:

Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in. It is the predictable patterns of who does what and habitual strategies for telling the world about the things held most dear. A culture includes the congregation's history and stories of its heroes. It includes its symbols, rituals, and worldview. It is shaped by the cultures in which its members live (represented by their demographic characteristics), but it takes on its own unique identity and character when those members come together. Understanding a congregation requires understanding that it is a unique gathering of people with a cultural identity all its own.

Congregations draw their culture and identity from their specific religious tradition. What each congregation cooks up, then, is always a mix of local creativity and larger tradition. What we see in a given locale is that group's selective retrieval of their own theological heritage, along with the local inventions that have been necessary to make sense of life in that place. . .

A congregational culture is constructed out of theological and denominational

traditions, expectations from the larger culture, patterns of social class and ethnicity, and the like. All those things are carried into the congregation by its members and leaders. Whenever any of those elements changes, the congregation will inevitably change as well.

Congregational culture is more than the sum of what people bring with them and more than a mirror image of the theological tradition they represent. It is a unique creation, constructed out of their interaction together over time. (Ammerman, 78-82)

The dynamics of congregational culture at work can be seen in this analysis of the genius of black congregations by Robert Michael Franklin in his essay “The Safest Place on Earth: The Culture of Black Congregations.”

In order to understand the genius of black congregations, it is important to understand how the congregation’s entire culture does the work of empowering parishioners for mission. Central to that cultural work is the pivotal role of pastoral leadership in its manifestation of theological convictions, rhetorical skills, and practical wisdom. Most portraits of black congregations emphasize the role of clergy. This is understandable, given the elevated office of ministry in most black communities. A more careful examination of black congregational culture, however, requires attention to the array of practices that are sustained by the *laity*—style of worship, singing, ecstatic rituals (shouting, altar prayer), and politically relevant religious education. Effective congregational mission actually flows from the dynamic *interaction* between qualified, gifted leadership and an empowering congregational culture. Black clergy are, in the first instance, servants called to nurture and maintain a healthy congregational culture. Once progress in

this task has been demonstrated, then they may be authorized in the public arena. (258)

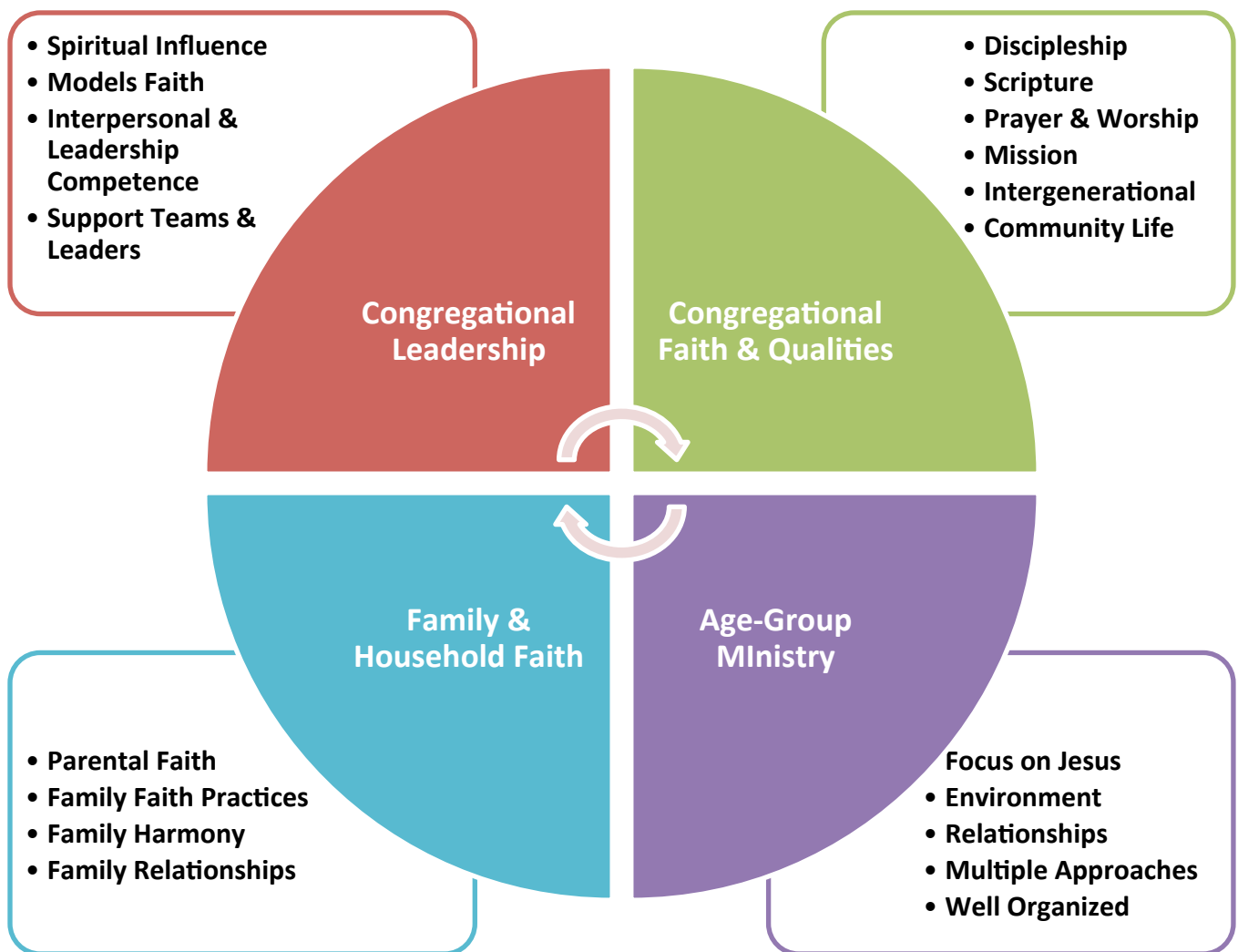
The characteristics of black congregational culture include: (1) full engagement of the senses in worship, (2) intimate prayer, (3) cathartic shouting, (4) triumphant singing, (5) politically relevant religious education, and (6) prophetic, imaginative preaching.

The entire culture of the black church thus works to create the sensibilities necessary for public mission. Black church culture is a rich and vibrant ensemble of practices that offer praise to God and hope to oppressed humanity. Clergy are expected first to maintain and then to mobilize this culture for Christ’s mission in the world. Maintenance and mobilization are dialectically related.

Preaching is the ecclesial practices most central to the sacred oral culture of African Americans and most essential for mobilizing and sustaining people for public action. Good black social preaching names and frames crises creatively, analyzes them in biblical perspective, describes solutions using indigenous symbols and images, prescribes specific plans, and offers hope via celebration. (Franklin, 258)

A Congregational Culture of Faith Formation

The “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” found that congregational culture generates four spheres of relationships and practices that intersect and powerfully impact the faith of young people and the whole congregation: 1) Congregational Faith and Qualities, 2) Age-Group Ministries, 3) Faith and Household Faith, and 4) Congregational Leadership.



Congregational Faith and Qualities

What kind of congregational faith and life nurtures youth and adults of committed Christian faith? The central insight of the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” is that the *faith and life of the congregation makes a huge difference.*

Congregational Faith and Qualities describe the values and dynamics of the intergenerational life and ministry of the whole congregation. These 18 characteristics (described as “Faith Assets” in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry”) describe aspects of the congregation’s theological orientation, faith maturity, values, attitudes, and practices that bear directly on

its capacity to engage and influence the faith of individuals and families.

Congregational Faith

These characteristics focus on the congregation’s theological commitments and the strategic decisions and patterns of ministry that flow from those theological commitments.

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

2. **Making Faith Central:** The congregation recognizes and participates in God’s sustaining and transforming life and work. The congregation helps people learn who God is and come to know Jesus personally. The congregation teaches people how to be a Christian, how to discover the meaning of the Bible for their lives, and how to pray
3. **Emphasizing Prayer:** The congregation practices the presence of God as individuals and community through prayer and worship. The congregation provides spiritually uplifting worship experiences that are enlightening, fulfilling, inspiring, interesting, easy to understand, and relevant in daily life.
4. **Focusing on Discipleship:** The congregation is committed to knowing and following Jesus Christ. The congregation brings the Gospel to people outside the church.
5. **Emphasizing Scripture:** The congregation values the authority of Scripture in its life and mission. The congregation makes mission and evangelism, i.e., bringing the Gospel to people outside the church, important in church life.
6. **Making Mission Central:** The congregation consistently witnesses, serves and promotes moral responsibility, and seeks justice. The congregation teaches people about Christian perspectives on moral questions and helps people learn how to apply their faith to decisions about what’s right and wrong. The congregation involves people in helping others through community service, making use of each member’s talents and abilities within the

congregation and in the community and world.

These six characteristics are supported by findings from the study. Youth, parents, and adult leaders in youth ministry rated the following congregational activities as most significant in expressing and living the congregation’s faith. Notice the shared perceptions among youth, parents, and adult leaders in youth ministry. A strong faith-filled congregational culture benefits young people and adults. (Rating based on a 9 point scale.)

Characteristics of Congregational Faith	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

Congregational Qualities

The ten Congregational Qualities reflect values, expectations and practices of the whole community that influence the life and faith of young people and adults.

7. **Supporting Youth (and Age-Group) Ministries:** Youth and ministry with young people are high priorities for the congregation.
8. **Demonstrating Hospitality:** The congregation values and welcomes all people, especially youth. The congregation is friendly and feels warm; it helps members make friends at church and feel at home. The congregation accepts people who are different and makes them feel welcome.

9. **Striving for Excellence:** The congregation sets high standards, evaluates, and engages in continuous improvement. The congregation is willing to change the way things are done to increase involvement with the church; it is innovative—demonstrating openness to the suggestions from members and the freedom to try new ideas.
10. **Encouraging Thinking:** The congregation welcomes questions and reflection on faith and life. The congregation challenges people to think about religious issues and ideas; and encourages them to ask questions and say what they think on religious issues.
11. **Creating Community:** Congregational life reflects high quality personal and group relationships. The congregation puts an emphasis on providing love, support, and friendship to members, especially those who are experiencing hardships.
12. **Encouraging Small Groups:** The congregation engages members in study, conversation, and prayer about faith in daily life.
13. **Promoting Worship:** The congregation expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship. The congregation provides spiritually uplifting worship experiences that are enlightening, fulfilling, inspiring, interesting, easy to understand, and relevant in daily life.
14. **Fostering Ethical Responsibility:** The congregation encourages individual and social moral responsibility. The congregation teaches people about Christian

perspectives on moral questions and helps people learn how to apply their faith to decisions about what's right and wrong.

15. **Promoting Service:** The congregation sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally. The congregation involves people in helping others through community service, making use of each member's talents and abilities within the congregation and in the community and world
16. **Demonstrating Effective Practices:** The congregation engages in a wide variety of ministry practices and activities.
17. **Participating in the Congregation:** Youth and adults are engaged in a wide spectrum of congregational relationships and practices.
18. **Assuming Ministry Leadership:** Youth and adults are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational activities.

These twelve characteristics are supported by findings from study. The strength of the Congregational Qualities demonstrates the content and force of the church's influence in the lives of its members. Again, notice how the perceptions of congregational life are shared by parents and adult leaders. A strong congregational culture benefits everyone! (Rating based on a 9 point scale.)

Congregational Qualities	Youth	Parents	Adult Leaders
Warm, Challenging Climate	7.05		
Welcoming Atmosphere		6.96	7.21
Satisfied with the 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	

A Congregational Culture that Promotes and Nurtures Committed Christian Youth and Adults

In the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” we found congregations that contributed significantly to a vital and living Christian faith in young people and adults. In these congregations we found committed Christian youth and adults (parents and adult leaders) who were growing in faith and living their faith in daily life. The following chart compares the highest youth and parent scores for many key characteristics of the Christian faith. (Rating based on a 9 point scale; NA = not asked.)

Characteristic of Christian Faith	Youth	Parents
I know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died on a cross and rose again.	8.54	NA
I have had feelings of being in the presence of God.	8.08	8.12
I have a sense of being saved in Christ.	8.08	8.09
I want to be the kind of person who helps people.	8.01	NA
The kind of moral decisions I make now will affect my future happiness.	7.57	8.31
My faith helps me know right from wrong.	7.44	8.24
God helps me decide what is right or wrong behavior.	7.33	7.88
My life is filled with meaning and purpose.	7.31	7.33
The active presence of God in my life has a positive influence on my religious faith.	7.22	NA
Religious faith is important in my life. (I am a religious person.)	7.20	7.37

My life is committed to Jesus Christ.	7.17	7.72
I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God's creation.	7.03	7.89
I have found a way of life that gives me direction.	6.92	7.22
The Bible is a positive influence on my faith.	6.88	NA
Worship services at my church have a positive influence on my religious faith.	6.83	NA
I have a real sense that God is guiding me.	6.51	7.30
I am involved in activities of service related to church, community, or world.	6.51	NA
I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually.	6.33	6.65
I talk with other people about my faith.	6.30	6.42
I feel God's presence in my relationships with other people.	6.28	6.87
I pray, have devotions, or meditate, either alone or with others.	6.11	NA
I give significant portions of time and money to help other people.	6.12	6.12
I try to apply my faith to political and social issues.	5.87	6.65
I have a sense of sharing in a great purpose.	NA	8.20

The youth and parents in the study possess and practice a vital and informed Christian faith—understanding the Christian faith, participating in worship, praying, and engaging in service and mission. They are committed to Jesus Christ and experience the presence of God in their daily lives and relationships with others. Their faith helps them decide what is right or wrong and take responsibility for serving those in need. Parents in the study seek out opportunities to grow spiritually. The overwhelming majority of parents are involved in spiritual support groups in their churches. They reported that they belonged to at least one church group in which others will prayer with them and for them as needed (7.23); in at least one church group in which they can talk about spiritual issues (6.99); and in at least one church group

in which it is possible to talk about personal problems (5.88).

The Power of an Intergenerational Faith Community

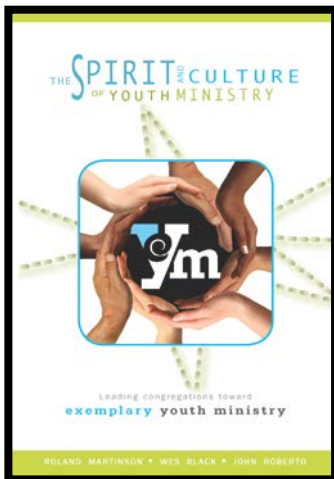
What was pervasive and unique in these congregations was the presence and power of quality *intergenerational relationships* and a *deeply bonded intergenerational faith community* and their impact on the faith and lives of young people, parents, and adults. These youth were surrounded by multiple, reinforcing spheres of relational Christian influence. They were immersed in a larger, multi-generational community of quality relationships informed by faith in Jesus Christ.

In these 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 is at the heart of a congregational culture that develops and nurtures Christian faith in all ages and generations.***

Works Cited

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The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry

Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto
St Paul: EYM Publications, 2010.

Congregations can indeed nurture youth to a vital Christian faith! Based on a national research study, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* provides insights into what congregations are doing to foster a vibrant, committed Christian Faith in the lives of youth people. At the heart of the study's findings is a congregational Culture of the Spirit— that permeates the values, relationships, and activities of a congregation, giving rise to a culture of mission and transformation that makes a congregation highly influential in the lives and faith of young people. This active presence of God surrounds the people of the whole congregation in its ministries with youth, parents, community, and leaders.

Order from the [Lifelong Faith Store](http://www.lifelongfaithstore.com).
Exemplary Youth Ministry Website: <http://www.exemplarym.com>

Exploring Your Congregational Culture

Congregational Faith

- How do you see your congregation living these 6 qualities of Congregational Faith? Identify specific illustrations for each quality.
- In what ways do each of these six qualities nurture and sustain people in the Christian faith?
- Which are the strongest qualities? How can you continue to enhance these?
- Which are the qualities that need attention? How can you develop these?

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

Congregational Life

- How do you see your congregation living these 12 qualities of Congregational Life? Identify specific illustrations for each quality.
- In what ways do each of these 12 qualities nurture and sustain people in the Christian faith?
- Which are the strongest qualities? How can you continue to enhance these?
- Which are the qualities that need attention? How can you develop these?

7. **Supports Age-Group Ministry:** age-group ministry (children, youth, young adults, adults) are high priorities
8. **Demonstrates Hospitality:** values and welcomes all people
9. **Strives for Excellence:** sets high standards, evaluates, and engages in continuous improvement
10. **Encourages Thinking:** welcomes questions and reflection on faith and life
11. **Creates Community:** reflects high quality personal and group relationships
12. **Encourages Support Groups:** engages members in study, conversation, and prayer about faith in daily life
13. **Promotes Worship:** expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship through the congregation's life
14. **Fosters Ethical Responsibility:** encourages individual and social moral responsibility
15. **Promotes Service:** sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally
16. **Demonstrates Effective Practices:** engages in a wide variety of ministry practices and activities
17. **Participate in the Congregation:** all ages are engaged in a wide spectrum of congregational relationships and practices
18. **Assume Ministry Leadership:** youth and adults are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational activities

The 44 Faith Assets from the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry”

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

Congregational Faith

Asset 1. Experiences 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. Makes Faith Central: 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. Makes Mission Central: The congregation consistently witnesses, serves and promotes moral responsibility, and seeks justice.

Congregational Qualities

Asset 7. Supports Youth Ministry: Youth and ministry with young people are high priorities for the congregation.

Asset 8. Demonstrates Hospitality: The congregation values and welcomes all people, especially youth.,

Asset 9. Strives for Excellence: The congregation sets high standards, evaluates, and engages in continuous improvement.

Asset 10. Encourages Thinking: The congregation welcomes questions and reflection on faith and life.

Asset 11. Creates Community: Congregational life reflects high quality personal and group relationships.

Asset 12. Encourages Small Groups: The congregation engages members in study, conversation, and prayer about faith in daily life.

Asset 13. Promotes Worship: The congregation expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship.

Asset 14. Fosters Ethical Responsibility: The congregation encourages individual and social moral responsibility.

Asset 15. Promotes Service: The congregation sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally.

Asset 16. Demonstrates Effective Practices: The congregation engages in a wide variety of ministry practices and activities.

Asset 17. Participate in the Congregation: Youth are engaged in a wide spectrum of congregational relationships and practices.

Asset 18. Assume Ministry Leadership: Youth are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational activities.

Youth Ministry Qualities

Asset 19. Establishes a Caring Environment: Youth ministry provides multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging.

Asset 20. Develops Quality Relationships: Youth ministry develops authentic relationships among youth and adults establishing an environment of presence and life engagement.

Asset 21. Focuses on Jesus Christ: Youth ministry’s mission, practices, and relationships are inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Asset 22. Considers Life Issues: Youth ministry values and addresses the full range of young people’s lives.

Asset 23. Uses Many Approaches: Youth ministry intentionally and creatively employs multiple activities appropriate to the ministry's mission and context.

Asset 24. Is Well Organized and Planned: Youth ministry engages participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation, and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations.

Family and Household Faith Assets

Asset 25. Possesses Strong Parental Faith: Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith.

Asset 26. Promotes Family Faith Practices: Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life.

Asset 27. Reflects Family Harmony: Family members' expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.

Asset 28. Equips Parents: The congregation offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equips parents for nurturing faith at home.

Asset 29. Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships: The congregation offers parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.

Leadership

Pastor

Asset 30. Exercises Spiritual Influence: The pastor knows and models the transforming presence of God in life and ministry.

Asset 31. Demonstrates Interpersonal Competence: The pastor builds a sense of community and relates well with adults and youth.

Asset 32. Supports Youth Ministry: The pastor understands, guides, and advocates for youth ministry.

Asset 33. Supports Leaders: The pastor affirms and mentors youth and adults leading youth ministry.

Youth Minister

Asset 34. Provides Competent Leadership: The youth minister reflects superior theological, theoretical, and practical knowledge and skill in leadership.

Asset 35. Models Faith: The youth minister is a role model reflecting a living faith for youth and adults.

Asset 36. Mentors Faith Life: The youth minister assists adult leaders and youth in their faith life both one-on-one and in groups.

Asset 37. Develops Teams: The youth minister reflects a clear vision and attracts gifted youth and adults into leadership.

Asset 38. Knows Youth: The youth minister knows youth and the changes in youth culture, and utilizes these understandings in ministry.

Asset 39. Establishes Effective Relationships: The youth minister enjoys effective relationships with youth, parents, volunteers, and staff.

Youth and Adult Leaders

Asset 40. Are Equipped for Peer Ministry: Youth practice friendship, care-giving, and outreach and are supported by ministry training and caring adults.

Asset 41. Establish Adult-Youth Mentoring: Adults engage youth in the Christian faith and life supported by informed leadership.

Asset 42. Participate in Training: Youth and adults are equipped for ministry in an atmosphere of high expectations.

Asset 43. Possess Vibrant Faith: Youth and adult leaders possess and practice a vital and informed Christian faith.

Asset 44. Demonstrate Competent Adult Leadership: Adults foster authentic relationships and utilize effective practices in youth ministry with a clear vision strengthened by training and support.