



Best Practices in Adolescent Faith Formation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seven Principles of Contemplative Youth Ministry

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

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

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

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

Strategies

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

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

contemplative prayer (usually *lectio divina*)

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

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

Impact

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Specifically the EPDYM study identified the following characteristics of congregations:

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

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

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

Strategies

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

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

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

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

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

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

Equipping for Leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

intelligences identified by Howard Gardner include :

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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- Yaconelli, Mark. *Growing Souls—Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Web Sites on the Research Studies

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

Practice Ideas

Planning for Adolescent Faith Formation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

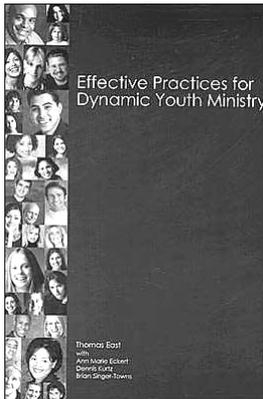
- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for adolescents to determine how well they utilize the characteristics of learning today.
 - Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of teenagers.
 - verbal-linguistic
 - logical-mathematical
 - visual-spatial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

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

Action Strategies

Best Practice Resources

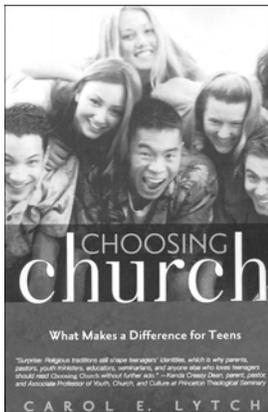
Adolescent Faith Formation



Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry

Tom East with Ann Marie Eckert, Dennis Kurtz, and Brian Singer-Towns
(Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004) [\$14.95]

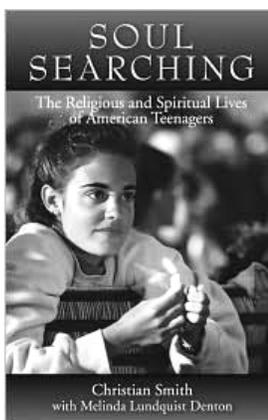
Based on nationwide research project of Catholic parishes with dynamic youth ministry, *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* presents the qualities and attitudes that support dynamic youth ministry, and the practices and activities that help young people grow spirituality and reinforce their Catholic identity. Chapters in the book are organized around the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of youth ministry: Parish Support, Qualities, Program Elements, Leadership, and Practices. Each chapter blends research findings with practical strategies for developing a more effective youth ministry. The research was conducted with Catholic parishes, but the findings will be helpful to all Christian churches.



Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens

Carol E. Lytch (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004) [\$24.95]

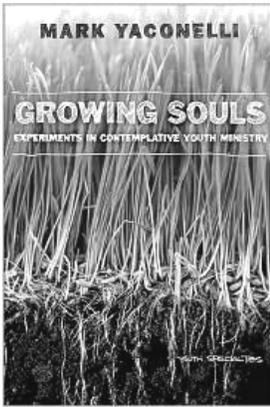
Carol Lytch presents this well-researched study of what attracts teenagers to the church and what keeps them there. Her research includes interviews of youth leaders, teenagers, and their parents in three congregations—mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Roman Catholic. Lytch explores ways that youth grow in their faith and in their relationship to the church. *Choosing Church* provides a description of the most effective ways that congregations and parents can foster faith in early teenagers that will help them value the church as a place to obtain identity, belonging, and growth. Chapters include: How Churches Attract Teens, How Churches Hold Teens, Seven Styles of Being Religious...or Not, and Nurturing Teen Religious Loyalty in the Family.



Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers

Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) [\$25]

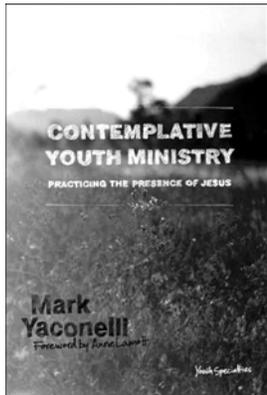
Soul Searching presents the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, a nationwide telephone survey of teens and their parents, as well as in-depth face-to-face interviews with more than 250 of the survey respondents. The study reveals many surprising findings, such as teenagers are far more influenced by the religious beliefs and practices of their parents and other adults than is commonly thought. The authors also challenge the conventional wisdom that teens today are “spiritual seekers,” and show that greater teenager religious involvement is significantly associated with more positive life outcomes. Chapters include an overview of the research findings, religious profiles of teens (seekers, disengaged, religiously devoted), adolescent religion in social context, adolescent religion and life outcomes, and recommendations for action.



Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry

Mark Yaconelli (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) [\$21.99]

In 1997 Mark Yaconelli cofounded the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project at San Francisco Theological Seminary, leading retreats and events to help youth workers cultivate a practice of unceasing awareness of God in their lives and ministries, which led to the development of a contemplative approach to youth ministry. *Growing Souls* is a collection of stories, conversations, and insights from many of the people involved in the project; it reveals the struggles and successes encountered while exploring contemplative prayer and presence in youth ministry. Included are profiles of four churches involved in contemplative youth ministry.



Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus

Mark Yaconelli (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) [\$19.99]

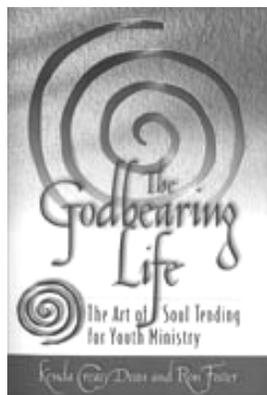
Mark Yaconelli spent hundreds of hours in small circles of people praying, listening, and discerning God's presence within churches and youth ministry programs. This book puts into words the experiences and wisdom he gained from these little communities of faith. He explains that youth ministers get too caught up in programs, curriculum, events, and what to say to teens to get them engaged, while many young people remain just as bored and unfocused as ever. *Contemplative Youth Ministry* is a more organic approach to youth ministry allowing ministers to create meaningful silence, foster covenant communities, engage kids in contemplative activities, and maximize spontaneity, helping young people recognize the presence of Jesus in their everyday lives. Through the application of contemplative traditions and authentic relationship building, a new style of youth ministry can emerge.



Total Faith Initiative Coordinator's Manual

Tom East, Ann Marie Eckert, Leif Kehrwald, Brian Singer-Towns, and Cheryl Tholcke (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004) [\$39.95]

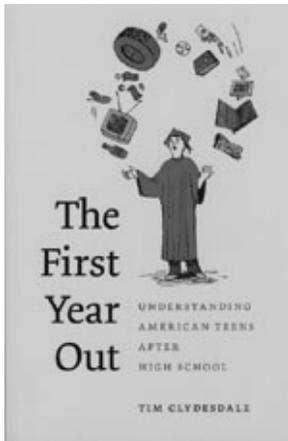
The *Coordinator's Manual* gives leaders what they need to plan and implement a dynamic and effective youth ministry using the key findings from the *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* study (Thomas East, et al.). Chapters include practical processes, tools, and strategies for visioning and planning youth ministry, choosing a model for youth ministry, planning a season of ministry, gathering with youth, connecting with youth, connecting with families of youth, and connecting youth to the parish community. Written for Catholic parishes, the models and ideas in this book will apply easily to all Christian congregations.



The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry

Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998) [\$15]

The Godbearing Life is now a classic in youth ministry, and deservedly so. The vision and approach of Dean and Foster resonates so well with the research findings on best practices. Their six Godbearing practices—communion, compassion, teaching and nurture, witness, dehabituating, and worship—provide a focus and direction for developing contemporary congregational youth ministry that is theological and pastorally sound.



The First Year Out

Understanding American Teens after High School

Tim Clydesdale
(University of Chicago Press, 2007)

Tim Clydesdale is associate professor of sociology at The College of New Jersey.

Based on his analysis of 125 in-depth interviews and a year of field research, in *The First Year Out* sociologist Tim Clydesdale describes the day-to-day lives and shared culture of American teens who graduated from high school between 1995 and 2003. Clydesdale reveals how day-to-day life consumes teens' attention.

While the public may believe pre-conceived notions that college is full of parties, drinking, and drugs, Clydesdale explains most teenagers' lives are much more complex. "So many assume an 'animal house' scene, when it's much more varied," he says.

When high school graduates make the transition to college freshmen, they must learn to adjust their lives for self-dependence and personal responsibility. Most teenagers handle this process well, learning to balance personal relationships, assimilating into popular American culture, working to fulfill financial needs and meet post-secondary educational requirements.

Though teenagers are becoming self-reliant, Clydesdale explores the deeper problem teenagers face from becoming too preoccupied with their daily lives. Students have many obligations within their daily lives, and to manage these responsibilities, Clydesdale observed teenagers push aside political, religious, and racial identities in order to mold into American culture.

"The good news is that teens learn to handle daily life fairly well, but the bad news is that they do so by ignoring the bigger picture," Clydesdale says.

In his book, Clydesdale does not condemn teenagers for their lives, but warns about potential problems. With the pressures of the expensive American lifestyle, comes the obligation to complete a post-secondary education in order to procure a job to support this lifestyle. Clydesdale also makes an argument about how teenagers manage their gratifications, as in putting off binge drinking for a night to study hard in order to party twice as hard the night after. These teenagers often live a double-life, presenting themselves as responsible to parents and professors, but primarily concerned about the next party and not their education.

Without teenagers striving for political and social change, the future is unsure for their generation. Although most teens are preoccupied with their daily lives, Clydesdale recognizes a group of "exceptional teens." These teenagers embrace their political, religious, and social identities, challenge societal standards, learn for the sake of knowledge and desire to infuse the world with positive change.

"Exceptional teens are critical of popular culture and really want to understand their own lives and the wider world carefully," he says.

Clydesdale offers an in-depth, well-organized and unique perspective on teenage life. He enlightens the public of the issues and complexities of a teenager's life for understanding and empathy on the challenges these teenagers face and what can be done to change the obstacles.