

Findings from Think Tank 2012

26 issues that will affect youth ministry in the next decade

In January, the Center for Youth Ministry Training held our fourth annual Lilly Laboratory Think Tank. Youth ministry practitioners and academics from across the country came together to discuss the future of youth ministry. Prior to gathering in Nashville, attendees were tasked with the following: *Briefly name and discuss three cultural and/or theological trends, issues, or changes that you believe youth ministry will face over the next decade which will require further research, thought and response by practical theologians and practitioners in the youth ministry community.* Attendees submitted three "white papers" discussing the issues they believed to be most pressing. After much debate and discussion, the group landed on 26 issues that will affect youth ministry in the next decade.

We want to share that list with you, but more importantly, we want to know what you think. You are on the ground and in the trenches of youth ministry, and you may have quite a different view. Are we right on? Join the conversation using the Facebook plug-in at the bottom of the article.

Cultural Trends and Shifts in Youth Ministry

Spiritual Practices in a Digital Age

How we receive information continues to change. How does that affect our spiritual practices? How can technology enhance spiritual practices by connecting teens to God? How can we help them unplug and find space to be with God?

Multi-faith Issues in Youth Ministry

Today's youth world is pluralistic and the church has underprepared youth and adults to live out their faith within this culture. How will youth ministry address our ever-changing culture? Not everyone lives in the Bible belt.

Equipping Parents and Families for Spiritual Formation

Most often, the issue of involving parents and family in youth ministry and/or in the spiritual formation of their youth, the family is defined in a very North American, nuclear context. It's time for a new kind of family/parent/youth ministry conversation to emerge. Jesus constitutes a new kind of family. How might family ministry be reshaped into communities of practice within local congregations?

Hypermobility: A Lack of Rootedness

If God is a social God and being a person is connected to relational realities, how can communities of Christian practice develop if people (including youth workers) are not tethered to a specific place and community? Maybe the church should provide an alternate narrative to consumer-driven hypermobility. Stability, proximity, and longevity in a community of practice are essential for Christian formation. Such involvement affords the church and Christianity the opportunity to deal with many of

the other challenging issues with which they are faced.

Extended Adolescence

Once a person comes to Christ, the primary goal of ministry is to help a person mature in his relationship with Christ "to be conformed to the image of [the] Son" (Romans 8:29) and to become more self-differentiated living out "a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). With the growing discussion on extended adolescence and the potential impact it has on faith formation, it is critical for this phenomenon to be looked at carefully and quickly so that best practices can be identified in helping young adults move steadily towards maturity.

Youth Ministry and the Church

Missional Faith Formation

Our country club churches have provided youth with a skewed ecclesiology. We go to church. But what does the church do? Defining the mission of the church will be essential to drawing this generation back not to a building but to the mission of God.

Sustainable Faith

Youth ministry or the church needs to tackle the need to support sustainable faith through family systems. All the research points to this as essential; how will we respond? Should the movement come out of youth ministry or out of the larger church?

Welcome to Corinth

Bad news: If we ever thought we were in control of social norms, that is not the case today. Good news: The historical witness of God's people affirms that the Gospel takes root and flourishes in the messiness of people's lives—even, and maybe especially—when we are cultural outliers. What can we do to prepare the church to bloom where it is planted?

The Spiritual Direction Movement and Youth Ministry

How do we broker the burgeoning movement of trained spiritual directors as a resource for the benefit of youth and young people? We can imagine one-on-one spiritual direction available to youth; group spiritual direction available for volunteers who work with youth; spiritual direction available for paid youth workers; circles of trust or clearness committees. An overflow from this would be an ability for all church folk to sit and listen, to discern, to sift through the noise.

Ecclesiology Anyone? The 501(c)3-ization of the Church

(Or It's the End of the Church as They Know It, and They Feel Fine)

Most Christian teenagers, especially those from "successful" youth ministries, are graduating from their churches fully socialized into loving Jesus but not the church. Many are motivated to live out their faith by serving sacrificially, but most choose to invest primarily in causes promoted by movements outside the church. The church must be able to tell a better story if we hope to engage the next generation in the body of Christ, not simply in charitable organizations doing good (and often Christian) works. We must ask whether a young person can be fully formed as a disciple apart from a connection with the messy, incomplete, holy, and broken church of Jesus Christ. This is an issue that is clearly present in the church but which promises to amplify in intensity in the coming years.

Vocational Youth Ministry

Simplification of Youth Ministry

More programs are not the answer. How can we equip youth workers to do more with less by making the larger church and the home the key points of spiritual growth and allowing the youth ministry to come alongside those efforts.

Life, Work, and Vocation of Those Who Minister to Youth

It is anticipated that the role of "youth minister" will undergo important shifts in the next decade as the number of congregations able to employ professional youth workers decreases and the number of volunteers leading youth ministries increases. For both professionals and volunteers, this shift necessitates a greater need for research and resources to help those serving in youth ministry develop healthy spiritual, physical and emotional lives as well as ongoing vocational resources.

Redefining the Role of the Youth Minister

The "youth pastor" of the future may change. The church may begin to have broader expectations for the youth pastor. As churches embrace (if they do) the findings of the [National Study of Youth and Religion](#) they may become more uncomfortable with the segmentation of ministries from child to youth to young adult. In response to these new findings, the traditional role of the youth pastor may be tweaked or phased out in preference to ministry generalists who pursue a more holistic approach to faith development.

The Laborization of Research: Practice-Based Analysis and Synthesis of Research

We have a lot of research into the recent practice and outcomes of youth ministry.

We have the beginnings of a descriptive literature built on that research.

As we think about possible futures for the practice of youth ministry, we could really use a new round of analysis and synthesis to identify what still needs evidence-based study. If we could, at the same time, extend the range of theological reflection, we might find ourselves in a position to generate and test new hypotheses about what's downstream for the theory, theology and

practice of youth ministry.

Youth Ministry and Caring for the Individual

Theology of Personhood/Human Flourishing

Without a proper theology of "who I am in God's eyes," a teenager cannot address the issues pressing on adolescence. How we respond to sexuality, physical wellness, our theology of the body, and sin should be grounded from our theology of personhood. Youth ministry can help youth properly orient themselves in their relationship with God that will also orient them in how to respond to the world around them.

Agents of Healing & Wellness for Youth: Vocationally, Spiritually, Emotionally, Physically

Often most, if not all, aspects of a youth's life beyond their spiritual life is neglected by the church. What does it look like for the church to be a healing agent for the emotional, physical, and vocational aspects of life? How does the church help young people discover their deep gladness and find their purpose and place in this world? How can the church offer emotional healing and help youths understand and care for their own physical well being? Theological reflection is needed to address a holistic approach to ministering to youth.

Reclaiming Intimacy and Relational Integrity

Sexual expression has come to define relationships instead of sexuality being one possible expression of a healthy relationship. Relationships and intimacy need to be reclaimed in their intended states rather than being defined solely by sex. The loss of relational integrity and a holistic understanding of chastity as the means to maintaining the proper form of intimacy in each and every relationship has led to the disintegration of healthy relationships of all forms.

Lets Talk About...Sex

For the past thirty-plus years, the issue of human sexuality has confounded the church as we attempt to traverse often contested territory of biblical faithfulness, cultural relevance, and pastoral concern. We envision several key areas to be addressed as youth ministry continues to wade in these waters, including:

- helping young people wrestle with questions of sexual identity in a healthy way within communities of nurture and care
- practical matters helping youth workers and faith communities deal with new challenges
- developing communities of hospitality and love that respond in biblically faithful ways
- developing strategies for healthy dialogue among a plurality of opinions

Theodicy and Biblical Literacy

Youth and Theodicy

Today's young people have grown up in the aftermath of 9/11, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many have witnessed, participated in, or been the victim of violence, from bullying to hazing to murder. Some suggest that a significant number of youth who live in chronically violent neighborhoods suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The culture of violence shaping the lives of many young people is also shaping their concept of God. The question is in what ways. How are they making sense of a God that is considered good who "allows" such violence and subsequent trauma to occur?

Learning to Speak Again about Faith

Youth ministry must address the lack of biblical literacy and theological knowledge in our youth and churches. Developing resources that equip youth workers and parents for this important work that enables youth to own their faith is essential.

Biblical Literacy

At the core of the Christian faith is the story of God's relationship with humanity. Until youth (and their adult mentors) develop a deep understanding of this story and the theological language to talk about and share it, many of the other issues related to youth ministry are moot. The Christian narrative is compelling and transformational, yet many published resources available to youth leaders are shallow or promote ineffective methods for helping youth experience and internalize our faith story.

Resurrecting a Passion for Scripture

It's not scarcity of resources. Despite the existence of a plethora of Bible study resources ranging from inductive to narrative, we find that when actually reading Scripture, young people still glaze over and become lost in what the Scriptures mean. The "Bible study" on the youth ministry calendar often implies simply downloading of a particular theological agenda rather than training in how to read and wrestle with the meaning of Scripture. We need to find a compelling way to engage students with the mystery of and passion for the Scripture.

Youth Ministry Where the Youth Are

Reciprocal Ministry With and Within Under-Resourced Contexts

One of the pressing challenges in youth ministry is the population growth among young people in under resourced global urban contexts coupled with the narrow focus of practical theological reflection and resource development that is exported from Westernized suburban contexts. We envision the development of resources that both grow out of and attend to the unique particularities of young people in diverse, urbanized contexts and under resourced communities. Part of this response is envisioning a shift in the youth ministry paradigm that incorporates leaders and communities in the two-thirds world as crucial partners in the conversation rather than mission recipients.

Architecting Greenhouses in the Barren Places

Youth ministry as we know it is so weighed down with the legacy infrastructure of "the way we've been doing youth ministry for years" that it's possible that the next incarnation of youth ministry will not be grown in the soil of "successful" North American youth ministry. Could it be that the most fruitful experimentation and most faithful innovations will come from those contexts that seem the most barren—in refugee camps, in crowded urban slums, in the under-resourced, organic, micro-communities of faith around the globe? Could it be that careful on-the-ground listening to this process could provide the seedbed not just of the next incarnation of youth ministry but of the church as well?

Global Youth Ministry: Youth Outside the US

Based on current and projected global population growth trending in the direction of rapid urbanity and poverty, we are convinced that youth ministry must be decentralized from its home in middle class suburban America. This reality is currently pressing as well as emerging. Research, theological reflection and resource must be rethought and recontextualized if we are to be true to global impulses and faithful to the sending Gospel of Jesus. What does it mean to walk alongside young people in impoverished, under-resourced communities?

Un-niching Youth Ministry

Youth ministry must get beyond white suburban youth ministry and engage un/under-served segments of the youth population. The vast majority of the country and world's youth exist outside the church culture served by professional youth ministry.



Think Tank 2012 Attendees (pictured left to right)

Stephen Ingram, Canterbury United Methodist Church
Drew Dyson, Wesley Theological Seminary
Dori Baker, The Fund for Theological Education
Jim Hancock, The Tiny Company Called Me
Reggie Blount, Garrett Theological Seminary
Lesleigh Carmichael, Center for Youth Ministry Training
Mike King, Youthfront
Kenda Creasy Dean, Princeton Theological Seminary
Mark Matlock, Youth Specialties
Andrew Zirschky, Center for Youth Ministry Training
Deech Kirk, Center for Youth Ministry Training
Brian Kirk, Union Avenue Christian Church/Rethinking Youth Ministry
Mark DeVries, Youth Ministry Architects
Crystal Kirgiss, Purdue University
Tony Akers, Center for Youth Ministry Training
Calenthia Dowdy, Eastern University
Kris Konsowitz, Center for Youth Ministry Training
Mike Flavin, New Providence Presbyterian Church

