

A Reminder of an Often-Forgotten Reality

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If you think back to your elementary school days for a moment, you will probably remember you or someone else giving the following four-word challenge: “Oh yeah? Prove it!”

The essence of the “prove it” challenge is the need we all feel to back up our words. Well, it is time for those of us who have been proclaiming the importance of intergenerational youth ministry to back up intergenerational youth ministry as more than just another programming fad.

Findings from *Soul Searching*

As sociologists paying attention to adolescent issues, Dr. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton noticed a gap in contemporary research on teenagers and their faith. As a result, Smith launched the National Study of Youth and Religion with the goal to “develop a better scholarly and public understanding of the religious and spiritual lives of American Adolescents”¹ [1] and provide “stimulus for soul-searching conversations.”² [2] While the study’s findings extend beyond the scope of intergenerational relationships, this article focuses on those findings that are most relevant to intergenerational youth ministry.

Finding #1: Parents and adults are the primary influencers of spiritual formation.

“Even though agents of religious socialization do not appear to be wildly successful in fostering clarity and articulacy about faith among teens, it remains true that parents and other adults exert huge influence in the lives of American adolescents-whether for good or ill, and whether adults can perceive it or not-when it comes to religious faith and most other areas of teen’s lives.”³ [3]

While there are a significant number of teenagers who take religious faith and practice seriously, Smith and Denton came across a much larger number of teenagers who were “remarkably inarticulate and befuddled about religion.”⁴ [4] Throughout their study, “little evidence that the agents of religious socialization in this country [parents/adults] are being highly effective and successful with the majority of their young people.”⁵ [5]

Yet even so, the study found parents and other adults as the number one influencers of teenage religious faith and practice. The influence of parents and adults was found to be so strong that Smith and Denton refer to the common cultural assumption that a teenagers’ peer group is more influential than that of adults in teenagers’ lives as “badly misguided.”⁶ [6]

Finding #2: Youth ministry programming is important.

“In the absence of parental encouragement by example to attend religious services, religious congregations that offer teenagers organized youth groups-particularly those with full-time, paid, adult youth group leaders-seem to make a significant difference in attracting teens to attend congregational religious services. Well-developed, congregational-based youth groups with established youth leaders likely provide teens who lack parental support appealing doorways into and relational ties encouraging greater religious participation in the life of religious congregations.”⁷ [7]

As a professional youth worker, I particularly like this finding. It demonstrates the importance of youth ministry programming in the body of Christ. With that said, Smith and Denton’s comments need to be examined so that the significance of “youth ministry” is properly understood.

“In the absence of parental encouragement....” Even though important to the attraction of teenagers to religious services, the role of youth ministry is of secondary importance to that of parents.

“...appealing doorways into and relational ties encouraging greater religious participation in the life of religious congregations....” According to Smith and Denton, the role of youth ministry in situations where a teenager lacks parental support is to provide “appealing doorways” for significant relationships to develop.

Personally, I have been a part of some incredible youth programs. These programs have been able to attract large numbers of students and lead many students to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. However, when I

reflect back on the students who lacked strong parent support, our impact was not through our programs; it came through the ways we offered meaningful relationships with other adult believers that continue to be sustaining influences in their discipleship journeys to this day.⁸ [8]

Finding #3: Teenage spirituality is a reflection of adult spirituality.

“The religion and spirituality of most teenagers actually strike us as very powerfully reflecting the contours, priorities, expectations, and structures of the larger adult world into which adolescents are being socialized.”⁹ [9]

Teenagers pick up their religious cues from the surrounding adult culture. As a result, Smith and Denton found the religious world of teenagers quite like that of the adult world.

What does the religion our teenagers are being socialized into look like? This is where Smith’s findings become more alarming.

Finding #4: Teenagers are being socialized into a different “Christian” faith.

“It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”¹⁰ [10]

Smith and Denton refer to the “pathetic” version of faith as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD). MTD is “a widely shared, largely apolitical, interreligious faith fostering subjective well-being and lubricating interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere.”¹¹ [11] MTD “exists, with God’s aid, to help people succeed in life, to make them feel good, and to help them get along with others-who otherwise are different- in school, at work, on the team, and in other routine areas of life.”¹² [12]

Practical Steps Forward

At the close of *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton provide an “unscientific” conclusion for religious communities and youth workers that gives practical suggestions for adult engagement with today’s youth culture. Smith and Denton found that teens will often come to church, tend to like the experience of church, and really do want to build meaningful relationships with ministers and other “mature mentoring adults.”¹³ [13] This raises several questions for us as youth workers. When we have church or youth group gatherings, are the adults connecting with kids or are each huddled separately, talking only with others who are in the same lifestage? When we load up youth ministry vans and buses, are the adults sprinkled throughout the entire vehicle or sitting in the front row with each other?

Youth ministries and churches who want to truly engage with teens in intergenerational relationships can take advantage of the following suggestions from Smith and Denton.¹⁴ [14]

- Get parents involved in youth ministry programming. In other words, stop focusing on pulling parents and other adults away from teenagers.
- Parents and other adults need to be involved in the teaching of their teenagers. Remember, great teaching begins with the building of great relationships with teenagers.
- Parents and other adults should be encouraged to talk to teenagers about faith issues.
- Encourage the entire adult faith community, not just moms and dads, to develop meaningful relationships with teenagers. Encourage adults to be proactive in starting up conversations, learning names, asking questions, and being a presence in a student’s life. This type of informal interaction will make deeper relationship opportunities possible.
- While spiritual formation certainly has a practical effect on a student’s moral life (i.e. drugs, alcohol, sexuality, obedience, etc.), the faith community should remained focused on developing committed disciples of Jesus and not simply good citizens.¹⁵ [15]

Action Points for Youth Workers

- Spend time discussing Smith and Denton’s research findings with your youth ministry team. Email this article ahead of time or distribute copies of this article to your team in person. Have them read the article, making notes for discussion as they go. Use some of the following questions as discussion springboards:
1. If parent and adult influence are so important in a teenager’s religious faith and practice, how (if at all) does our youth ministry programming reflect that importance?
 2. What are your thoughts on Smith and Denton’s belief that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has replaced traditional Christianity? Do you agree with his conclusion? Why or why not? Do you see any indications of MTD in our youth ministry programming? Where? (Only ask this question if you are ready to listen with thick skin.)
 3. How can we share the results of Smith and Denton’s study with our parents and adult sponsors? (i.e. how can we communicate the importance of parents and adults without sounding like we are “preaching” at them?)

- Spend time discussing the “Practical Steps Forward” section of the article with your youth team. Have them answer the following questions:

1. Which of the suggestions do you feel are particularly helpful in our youth ministry context? Explain.
2. Many suggestions do not take a major program shift to implement. Rather, they are shifts of emphasis and terminology. Practically, what shifts can our youth ministry team make to involve more adults in meaningful conversations and relationships with our teenagers?

1. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4. [↵ [16]]
2. Smith and Denton, 265. [↵ [17]]
3. Ibid. [↵ [18]]
4. Smith and Denton, 27. [↵ [19]]
5. Ibid. [↵ [20]]
6. Smith and Denton, 28. [↵ [21]]
7. Smith and Denton, 117. [↵ [22]]
8. In my experience, the same is true with students who come from families with strong parental support. [↵ [23]]
9. Smith and Denton, 170-171. [↵ [24]]
10. Smith and Denton, 171. [↵ [25]]
11. Smith and Denton, 169. [↵ [26]]
12. Ibid. [↵ [27]]
13. Smith and Denton, 265. [↵ [28]]
14. Smith and Denton, 265-271. [↵ [29]]
15. “Communities of faith would also do well, we think, to become more aware that a primarily instrumentalist view of faith is a double-edged sword. For many parents, religious congregations are good and valuable because they produce good outcomes in their children... It is an empirical fact that religiously involved youth generally do better in life than youth not religiously involved, for various reasons... But making this into religion’s key legitimating focus easily degenerates into a church-is-good-because-it-will-keep-my-kid-off-drugs-and-increase-their-seatbelt-use mentality...” Smith and Denton, 270-271. [↵ [30]]