



Forming Young Disciples: Opportunities for the Faith Formation of Adolescents

Tom East

How can we form a living faith within adolescents that will empower them to know and live the faith today? Congregational leaders, pastors, youth ministers, religious educators, and parents are all asking this question. For some this is a concern forged with urgency because they sense that their current efforts are ineffective. Others perceive this as a challenge to make the Good News new and vital in the lives of today's teenagers.

At the Center for Ministry Development we have had the opportunity to be involved with hundreds of congregations over the past five years as we conduct research in youth ministry and faith formation. This research has put us in touch with ministry leaders, parents, and youth, and has demonstrated that adolescent faith formation

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is working in many faith communities, large and small, across the nation. These congregations are employing different approaches and using various resources, but there is a common factor in all: forming faith in adolescents is an intentional congregational effort and priority. These communities recognize the graced moment of standing with an adolescent as he or she prepares to move into young adulthood. As a faith community, they seize this opportunity to strengthen family faith conversations, engage youth in the congregation, and share ways for living the faith, day by day with youth in ways that are bold, challenging, and practical.

by providing an encounter with Christ and promoting discipleship.

- ♦ To inform, we nurture people's minds and hearts with knowledge of the Christian faith so that who they are and how they live is shaped and influenced by what they know.
- ♦ To form, we nurture people's identity and lifestyle as disciples of Christ.
- ♦ To transform, we promote the personal and social transformation of the world according to the kingdom of God that Jesus preached.¹ (Groome, 13-15)

of youth for Christian living that occurs in communities within relationships of trust. This formation has numerous contexts and dimensions.

Evangelization and Discipleship

The evangelization of youth and of the culture in which they live is the context for faith formation of adolescents. Youth are hungering to meet the living Christ, to come to know the good news, and to encounter a compelling vision for the Christian life. To facilitate this encounter, the faith community must help youth to meet Christ anew: (Our task in faith formation is to) "present Christ as the Son of God, friend, guide, and model who can not only be admired but also imitated." (*National Directory for Catechesis*, 199)

"The point of incarnational ministry is not to model Christ so youth will follow us but—to use Martin Luther's language—to become "Christs" for our neighbor, incarnating Christ's love transparently so that youth will follow him" (Dean, 28).

In his opening remarks for World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI made this challenge: "Let Jesus surprise us during these days." Adolescence is a particularly rich and important opportunity to help young people be surprised by Christ and meet Jesus again for the first time. When I introduce my adolescent children to friends and relatives that they have not seen in several years, in a sense, they are meeting these people for the first time because they are meeting them as adolescents. Similarly, adults are now meeting an adolescent whom they knew as a child. Adolescent experiences are built on those of childhood but are also fresh, new,

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This article brings together research and practice in adolescent faith formation and explores this through a variety of themes: 1) aims of adolescent faith formation, 2) the world of the adolescent faith learner, 3) settings and models for adolescent faith formation, and 4) curriculum and methods.

Part I. Aims of Adolescent Faith Formation

Thomas Groome proposes that the aim of faith formation for people of all ages is to inform, form, and transform persons and communities

In other words, faith formation is intended to impact the head, heart, and hands of adolescents by helping them know, care about, and actively live the faith. This type of formation occurs within relationships. A web of relationships forms youth for Christian faith: relationships between youth and their family, youth with their peers and adult leaders, youth and the congregation. The congregation because of deep faith and a genuine affection for youth supports these relationships. These life-changing relationships are nurtured through the life of the congregation, including specific programs and strategies.

Understood in this way, adolescent faith formation is the intentional and informal formation

and surprising. These encounters are not one-time experiences; they happen again and again over time within the much larger process of evangelization, within which, youth strive to become disciples.

In the *General Directory for Catechesis*, the process for evangelization is described:

- ♦ transforming people and cultures through love
- ♦ bearing witness to the new way of life that characterizes Christians
- ♦ proclaiming the gospel and calling people to conversion
- ♦ incorporating people into the community by means of catechesis and sacraments
- ♦ continuous pastoral activity aimed at strengthening communion
- ♦ inspiring people to continue the mission of the Church, and sending them to proclaim the gospel through words and actions. (GDC, no. 48)

Maura Hagarty connects each of these phases to the practical dimensions of youth's journey in faith. A young person

- ♦ comes to know love
- ♦ is exposed to a new way of life through relationships with Christians, including peers and adults
- ♦ hears the gospel and is inspired to explore its implications
- ♦ is initiated through the sacraments and catechesis
- ♦ participates in the life of the community, including liturgy
- ♦ commits to continuing the church's mission. (Hagarty, 4)

Congregations can look at these steps and ask the practical questions: How can we help youth come to know the love of God? How can youth be exposed to a new way of life? How will they hear the gospel and explore its implications? How will youth be initiated into

Christian living? How will we promote youth participation in liturgy and worship? How can we

adolescence as creating an integrated sense of self-identity. Without this integration, a young

Youth are asking different questions: who am I? Where do I belong? What will I do with my life? Where can I invest my life and energies? Where is there an adventure large enough for me to be part of?

help youth to commit their lives in mission and service? "The challenge of evangelizing young people is clear: we are called to proclaim the Good News so that it responds to the lives and world of adolescents, invites their response, and empowers them to live as disciples today" (Ekstrom, 69).

Empowering youth as disciples of Jesus the Christ is the overarching aim for Christian faith formation. Adults who love youth are asking this question: how will we share a living faith with youth whom we care about? Youth are asking different questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? What will I do with my life? Where can I invest my life and energies? Where is there an adventure large enough for me to be part of? Youth are literally in the process of searching for the adventure of their life. As a Christian community we have the opportunity and the responsibility to present the good news and promote discipleship in Christ as this adventure.

Christian Faith Identity and Practices

In his classic work on adolescent development, David Elkind described the primary task of

person's self image is like the varied images displayed in a funhouse mirror. A young person behaves one way with his or her friends, another way at school, and a different way at home with family.

Faith identity is an important part of the identity that youth are forming through all of this. In fact, religious identity goes beyond the many functional identities that young people live with, since it is about their relationship with God. John Shea describes it this way: [Faith identity] "points to the ultimate identity of a people, formed in living relationship with a transcendent-immanent God, who has been revealed in Jesus Christ and who continues to be present in the Church" (Shea, 2).

As ministry leaders and religious educators, we sometimes worry that the youth who join us in prayer and faith sharing on Sunday act very differently at school on Wednesday. Yet this isn't just a problem for youth; inconsistency is part of the human condition. How can we help form a faith identity in young people that they can act on and live throughout their lives? After all, we don't want youth ministry or participation in the church to be one more competing activity in young people's already busy lives. To use a

computer screen as an analogy, we don't want "faith" to be just one more icon on the screen, something to click on and off. We hope that faith takes its rightful place in young people's lives. Faith is not another program or activity; faith is the operating system. It's the thing that makes everything else make sense.

For faith to become the operating system, youth must see and know people of vibrant faith. They also need to be immersed and formed in the practices of faith. Practices are actions and behaviors that have values embedded within them. If you wanted to learn to be a photographer, you could read books and study photography. But to become a truly great photographer you need to spend time with a great photographer. Through this mentoring, you would learn the little things and the disciplines that make someone excellent at their craft; you would learn the practices of photography.

Faith practices are like that; they are actions and behaviors we do as people of faith. Dorothy Bass describes it this way in *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*: "We call these practices because they have to be practiced. Practices don't live on the pages of a book but in the bodies, hands, feet, eyes, and compassion of real people, and learning practices means doing them not just once but many times" (Bass and Richter, 9). Congregations, families, and youth ministry

communities form youth in the practices of faith as an integral part of faith formation.

Part 2. The World of the Adolescent Learner

To accompany youth on their journey of faith, we must understand their world, with its accompanying joys and challenges. Adolescents are on a journey that takes them from the protective environment of childhood to the choice-filled world of adulthood. The word "adolescence" comes from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means, "to grow up." Where once it referred to the teenage years, adolescence today is understood to begin at age ten or eleven and continue through the mid-twenties. During the first several years of this time frame, young people are experiencing the physical changes of puberty. Their social world is expanding and they are engaged in more complex social situations. Family continues to be a major influence and source of support even as peers and the community are becoming more important.

Over the course of these years, youth will encounter a variety of experiences, engage with a variety of communities, learn about many topics, and grow in a variety of skills and abilities.

The journey of adolescence takes young people on a path towards responsible adult living. As people of faith, we know that the path of this journey is not random; our loving God created each young person in love and has a plan for each one's life. We are called to accompany young people on this journey so that faith-filled youth will become faithful adult disciples. When Jesus accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he listened to their questions, he explained the truths of faith, he revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread, and he sent them forth to tell others. This is the job description of the faith community, and in particular, the job of the ministry leaders and teachers, who are acting on behalf of the Christian community.

To walk with youth, we must learn their questions and understand their experiences. Each one's story will be unique, but many of the patterns of development are shared.

Young Adolescents and Their Families

The young adolescent, ages ten through fifteen years of age, is typically in middle school, junior high, or the first years of high school. During these years, they are experiencing the most rapid series of physical changes since infancy. The emotional and social changes that accompany puberty can be challenging, even overwhelming. Intellectually, young people are moving from concrete thinking towards abstract thinking. Abstract thinkers are able to imagine the consequences of actions and "what might happen if." Abstract thinking is critical for faith growth and moral development, as well as science, humanities, and math.

For faith to become the operating system, youth must see and know people of vibrant faith. They also need to be immersed and formed in the practices of faith.

This is a time when youth are beginning to develop their identity and express their individuality, even as they strive to belong within their peer group. This quest is often expressed in the clothes they wear and their physical appearance, as well as choices about styles of communicating and what peer groups to associate with. Friendship and belonging are of huge importance at this age. They are also experiencing faith in new ways; though young adolescents continue to experience faith primarily through their senses and their direct experiences, they are beginning to recognize God's presence in a new way within the community.

As the young person changes, likewise the family goes through a transition from being a family with children to being a family with youth. As Leif Kehrwald states, "The changes of adolescence—puberty, new ways of thinking, wider sphere of social activity and relationships, greater autonomy—present the entire family with a new set of challenges. In fact, it would be fair to say that the whole family experiences adolescence" (Kehrwald, 34)

This change means renegotiating patterns of communication, recreation, chores, and relationships. The task for these families in transition is to allow increasing independence while continuing to provide structure and close relationships.

Older Adolescents and Their Families

The older adolescent, ages fourteen to eighteen, is typically in high school and experiencing continued physical changes as well as encountering more complex social, intellectual, and emotional situations. This is a time when

youth are focused on developing their identity and are grappling with a variety of questions about authority, gender identification, and self-concept. They are finding themselves. As they develop their identity, they are looking for role models and mentors. They are developing a personal moral code and are growing in their capacity for mutual, more intimate relationships. Parents remain an important influence, but the approval of peers and people whom youth admire has gained in influence.

Because they are searching and exploring so many new domains in life, youth often question faith and assumptions they have held since childhood. In a sense, youth are unpacking the faith that has been handed to them by their parents and those who love them. In this process, they seek out consistency, and can seem negative or aggressive in their questioning. This experience can be disturbing and jarring to adults. We can see the questions as a rejection of faith. When youth question, they are not rejecting faith or the community; they are taking the necessary step of appropriating faith knowledge and practice into their lives. As a community of faith, we are called to surround them with love, care, and patience as we allow them to live the questions.

While youth are searching, adult family members are typically approaching midlife and are often in

the process of reflecting on their own lives and faith. Many families are beginning to provide care for the older generation, who are also in transition. In the midst of all of this reflection, re-sorting, and transition, the family seeks to continue to provide a spiritual home for all members. Congregations have the opportunity to minister to these families in this transition moment and provide resources so that family members can support each other with prayer, faith conversations, love, and care.

Adolescents and Brain Development

In recent years, scientists have learned a great deal about brain development. Some of these findings help us understand what a child and adolescent retains and what they lose in the learning process. You may have heard the saying, "it's like riding a bike; it just comes back to you." Yet it seems that this would depend on when you last rode a bike.²

Around ages eleven through thirteen, youth are experiencing growth in their frontal cortex, which is helping them develop the ability to have more control over impulses and make better judgments. This growth is accompanied by a period of "pruning" in which unused areas of the brain are cut off to strengthen the paths for areas that are used frequently. This pruning and

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growth is an important stage in brain development. What youth choose to do or not do could impact them for life. Dr. Giedd calls this the “use it or lose it principle,” and explained further, “If a teen is doing music or sports or academics, those are the cells and connections that will be hardwired. If they’re lying on the couch or playing video games or MTV, those are the cells and connections that are going to survive” (Spinks, 3).

What does “use it or lose it” mean to us as we share faith with adolescents? Well, it sounds like if you rode a bike as child but didn’t ride a bike as a young adolescent, you would lose that ability and memory. This makes this period of time all the more important for sharing faith and engaging youth in the practices of faith so that faithful living is an experience that is remembered and practiced for life.

Youth Knowledge and Practice of the Faith

Pastoral leaders and researchers are concerned about young people’s faith understanding and practice, as evidenced by numerous studies, conferences, and conversations. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton at the University of North Carolina conducted an important national research study, “The National Study on Youth and Religion.” The results were reported in the book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Regarding young people’s participation and beliefs, the study found the following:

Youth and Participation

- ◆ The vast majority of American youth and parents of youth are religious and in particular, Christian.

- ◆ Though many have proposed that youth are “spiritual but not religious,” youth did not identify with this statement. Most youth do not seem to seek spiritual growth outside of denominational participation.
- ◆ Most youth intend to remain practicing in the denomination in which they currently participate.
- ◆ Youth who participate in a youth group, retreat, work camp and other programs have higher levels of faith understanding and practice.
- ◆ Youth who are very religious also have lower rates of at-risk behaviors and more positive family relationships.
- ◆ Some youth seem to be disenfranchised and do not participate in youth programs. This would include youth from non-practicing families, and segments of the population of Hispanic youth.

Youth and Beliefs

- ◆ Mainline Protestant and Catholic youth were found to be largely inarticulate in stating beliefs and doctrine when compared to conservative Christians and Mormon youth.
- ◆ Youth belief and practice mirrors the belief and practice of their parents.
- ◆ Researchers propose that for many youth and adults an alternative creed is emerging across denominations. This is not a separate religion; it is a watered down creed that inhabits most denominations. The researchers describe this belief system as “moralistic

therapeutic deism.” In this view, an impersonal God wants us to be happy, good, nice, and fair to each other. This creed omits much of the content of traditional Christian belief.

One of the images that the researches use to describe adolescent faith is a “mirror.” “American youth actually share much more in common with adults than they do not share, and most American youth faithfully mirror the aspirations, lifestyles, practices, and problems of the adult world into which they are being socialized” (Smith, 14).

This summary reinforces things that we know and draws attention to the challenges of faith formation in our time. If youth are mirroring the “whateverism” of their parents and the wider culture rather than embracing the deeper truths of faith, the scope of our task in faith formation is clear. The challenge goes beyond valid concerns about the formation of religious educators and ministry leaders who share faith with youth. The challenge goes far beyond the methods to use in the classroom or youth room. Our challenge is evangelizing youth and their families through a bold and dynamic faith that is lived in an exemplary and visible way by a congregation.

Part 3. Settings and Models for Adolescent Faith Formation

Two recent studies on youth ministry and faith formation came to the same conclusion in their overall finding: the life of the congregation itself is the heart of

faith formation for adolescents and their families. In *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, this is described as becoming a “willing congregation.” These congregations are willing to fully engage youth within the community and surround youth with love, care, support and challenge:

[A community] that comes to know and treasure the youth in their midst will experience new ways of praying, celebrating, serving and learning. It is not about always letting youth have their way or about discarding the traditions of a community. But it is about letting youth have a way to truly belong. Youth and the community learn together and are transformed in the process. (East, 10)

In the “Spirit of Youth Ministry Project,” the key finding for effective faith formation of adolescents is described as “the culture or spirit of the congregation.”

A “culture” seems to emerge with its pervasive and distinct “spirit” and “atmosphere” that is more powerful than its component parts. It’s the combination of the core values, people, relationships, expectations, practices, and activities that seems to generate this spirit and atmosphere (Roberto, 3)

These communities form youth through the life and the lived theology of the congregation. Families are supported in sharing faith, and youth are gathered for youth ministry activities and programs. The heart of the formation is the life of the congregation itself. These communities identify and utilize the assets within their congregation to share faith with adolescents. These assets are different for each

community, which creates a very positive starting point for communities seeking to enhance faith formation of adolescents.

According to the asset-building approach, every congregation has faith assets; it is only a question of how many.

Congregations need to discover those that are already at work, and then chart a plan for developing more assets. An asset-building approach offers tangible qualities and practices that every congregation can adopt to nurture a maturing Christian faith for the youth in the congregation. (Roberto, 4)

These studies reinforce what we know from a broad variety of church documents and religious education theory: the faith community is the heart of faith formation. The life of the community sponsors Christian living. The community engages and includes youth, while at the same time providing faith formation for youth in age-specific ways, using the resources of the wider community.

Adolescents often rely upon all four of these settings: congregation, family, peers, and the wider community. For younger adolescents, the family remains the key place to explore and grow in faith, while at the same time, the peer group gains importance. Young people participate in congregational life and look for consistency between the faith they learn about and the lived practice of the community. Some young adolescents who are curious about faith topics explore these through books or web sites. Many more participate in events such as conferences, retreats, or service programs. Older adolescents tend to rely more on their peers and are able to engage in the life of the

congregation and use wider community resources more readily.

Experience of these settings also sets youth on the course to continue their faith growth as young adults, and adults.

1. **Family.** Families share faith through their lived practices and teachable moments of faith sharing and prayer.
 2. **Age-specific peer group.** Congregations gather adolescents in peer groups to participate in youth ministry, religious education and sacramental formation. In these peer groups, youth learn the faith in ways that connect to their development and faith maturity.
 3. **Congregation.** The life of the faith community itself forms faith in youth through worship, learning, community, and service. Adolescents strive to belong, and through their participation in the intergenerational community they learn and integrate faith.
 4. **Wider community and individualized learning.** The wider community includes the variety of ways that youth learn and grow in faith using the resources in the wider community. This includes participation in inter-church and regional youth conferences and events. It also includes the resources for faith formation found in print and online media.
- An effective model for faith formation of young adolescents will take these four settings into account. Typically, a congregation will choose one of these settings as the primary setting for intentional faith formation, while strengthening and making connections to the other settings. For instance, a community might choose to have intentional faith formation occur primarily

within the peer group and would provide support for family faith sharing, promote congregational involvement, and encourage youth to learn on their own by providing resources and starting points. Another community might begin with intergenerational faith formation and complement these efforts with peer group gatherings and support for family faith sharing.

Effective Faith Formation for Youth

Three models for the effective faith formation of youth emerge from research and pastoral practice.

1. Intentional faith formation infused throughout youth ministry and involvement in congregational life. In these communities, the faith content needed by adolescents is communicated throughout the programs and strategies of youth ministry. Some themes are addressed during the weekly youth community gathering. Others are addressed within faith sharing series or retreats. Other aspects are built into experiences such as youth preparing for a summer service trip or incorporating Catholic social teaching into their preparation. Youth who become involved in worship and liturgical ministries experience formation as part of their practical preparation. The faith formation in these communities is planned and intentional although it is woven throughout a variety of gatherings and involvements.

2. Intentional faith formation is part of the whole community in an intergenerational model. In these congregations, people of all ages participate in faith learning as an intergenerational community. The life of the congregation becomes the

starting point as the community gathers to prepare for the events of Church life, and learn the faith in the process. Often times, these learning events begin with the whole community gathered and include time when age groups are divided for teaching and faith exploration among peers. In congregations that are employing the intergenerational model as their primary faith formation effort, youth ministries can count on the community to provide the intentional faith formation. Other aspects of formation needed in particular ways by young people can be addressed through other aspects of youth ministry.

3. Intentional faith formation is a distinct element of youth ministry. In these churches, the faith formation is a distinct element within youth ministry. Religious education programs are offered to youth on a regular basis. The youth who participate in these programs are encouraged to participate in other aspects of youth ministry.

- faith sharing series
- home-based faith sharing programs for youth and their families.

Whatever the model, effective congregations strive to provide faith formation in a way that is planned, intentional, and collaborative.

Part 4. Curriculum and Methods

Faith formation of adolescents includes witness of the community and instruction in the faith content. Both of these components create the curriculum for faith formation.

The word “curriculum” comes from a Latin word meaning to run a race. In current use, people generally think of the curriculum as “the course to be run,” which implies that it is not the actual running. Since the content of faith education is most clearly understood as the beliefs and practices of the people, then faith formation needs to be understood as an educational

... consider two kinds of curriculum. The general curriculum would include...the spirit or culture of the community. The specific curriculum would include the communities, programs, and strategies directed towards adolescents and their families.

Some of the methods used for these elements include:

- weekly classes at grade level
- sacramental preparation programs for Confirmation
- week-long religious education programs offered in the summer

ministry that is embedded in and involves the entire Christian community. Therefore, the opportunities and methods for developing faith are as diverse as the community of faith itself.

This perspective significantly shifts our understanding of

curriculum. In her book *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church*, Maria Harris emphasizes that we must consistently distinguish between the curriculum of education and the curriculum of schooling. She suggests that “curriculum” is about the mobilizing of creative educative powers in such a way as to fashion a “People of God” through the practices of the people. This is very different than the traditional notion of curriculum as stacks of teacher guides and student textbooks.

In planning for effective faith formation of adolescents, one should consider two kinds of curriculum. The *general curriculum* would include the community itself, the environment and hospitality, the team of ministry leaders, and the spirit or culture of the community. The *specific curriculum* would include the communities, programs, and strategies directed towards adolescents and their families. This would include the variety of efforts that promote faith learning, prayer and worship, justice and service, and community life. These efforts could occur within the whole community, a community of peers, the family, or for individual youth.

One way to think about this distinction is to consider the differences between non-verbal and verbal communication. General curriculum is like the non-verbal communication of a community. This communication is constantly revealing the authentic nature, message, and Word alive within the faith community. Specific curriculum is like verbal

communication, which is intentional and focused on communicating specific content and messages clearly.

Dynamic Faith Learning

Communities that are effective in forming faith in adolescents recognize their role as faith witnesses and provide the specific curriculum for adolescent faith formation through dynamic faith learning opportunities. The following three principles summarize what we are learning about dynamic faith learning from communities across the nation.

Principle 1: Effective faith formation helps youth enter into the experience of living faith.³ It engages them experientially—head, heart, and lifestyles—in the learning activity, providing them with direct, first-hand experiences; respects and incorporates their experience in the learning activity; and engages them in real-world learning and application, making the connection between learning and life, and faith and life.

When working with postmoderns, we can never underestimate the e-factor: experiential. Postmoderns will do most anything not to lose connection with the experience of life. (Sweet, 22) This principle addresses three key aspects for utilizing experience within faith learning. First, the learning process should be experiential, allowing youth to put themselves completely into the learning process and

providing youth with an experience of faith. Second, we should access the lived experience of adolescents and help them to name and claim these experiences as they learn and grow in faith. Third, we need to help youth apply what they are learning to their everyday choices and situations. Consider these ideas:

- **Connect youth to adult members of the congregation.** Identify members of the congregation who are living the faith in an exemplary way. Connect youth to these adult mentors to accompany them in their actions on behalf of faith.
- **Provide affective experiences of prayer.** Youth experience faith through their senses and through their experience of belonging within a community. Prayer provides a direct contact with the sacred and builds young people’s relationship with God.
- **Provide retreat experiences.** Retreats provide an incredible opportunity for youth to experience Christ’s presence within prayer, witness, community, and sacrament. The extended time of a retreat and the carefully chosen elements help youth to go deeper in their experience.
- **Provide opportunities for service.** One young person described her experience of service in this way, “when I was caring for the person who was hungry and lonely, I felt as though I was touching the Body of Christ.” Experiences of service to those in need are hands-on opportunities for youth to be in touch with Christ’s presence.

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we can never underestimate the e-factor: experiential.**

Principle 2: Effective faith formation uses a variety of methods that engage the senses. It incorporates a variety of multi-sensory methods to engage the whole person, such as art, drama, music, dance, storytelling, media, prayer, rituals; and engages them in construction, discovery, and exploration of the topic or concept.

This principle reminds us of the importance of engaging the senses and addressing a variety of learning styles. We are also challenged to move the faith learner from being a passive listener to being someone who is helping uncover and discover the faith content. Consider these methods for presenting and processing faith content:

- interviews
- panel presentations
- guest speakers
- movies, TV, popular songs, and story connections
- presenting content and faith sharing within prayer
- skits, drama, and Scripture re-enactments
- Scripture search
- murals, collages, posters, and slogans
- station-based learning activities
- “guided tour” museum-style presentations

Principle 3: Effective faith formation builds a faith learning community.

It utilizes collaborative and group-centered formats for study, inquiry, activities, and sharing; provides an environment that is characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and inquiry; and is participative and interactive, actively engaging them in the learning process.

In the *National Directory for Catechesis*, the United States Catholic Bishops describe the importance of a learning community. [Effective faith

formation] “involves group participation in an environment that is characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and care, so that young people can hear and respond to God’s call (fostering the freedom to search and question, to express one’s own point of view, and to respond in faith to that call)” (NDC, 201).

Youth are naturally going to learn and grow in faith more comfortably in a community where they feel safe, accepted and valued. This principle reminds us of the importance of building community as we promote faith learning. Consider these ideas for building a faith learning community:

- include community builders and team building activities within faith learning
- provide opportunities for youth to share and pray for each other’s concerns
- integrate prayer throughout faith learning
- change groupings: use dyads, triads, and different combinations of small groups to provide an opportunity for youth to get to know one another
- go off-site from the church grounds: participate together in a service project, “pilgrimage” to a place for prayer or take a field trip to a place to experience worship, community or service with another congregation.

Connected Learning

One of the most effective means of providing faith formation is to connect faith learning with other aspects of youth ministry and involvement in church life. Using this method, youth experience formation in Christian teachings on

justice before and after providing direct service. Some youth learn about worship before engaging in liturgical ministries. Other youth learn about specific faith and Scripture themes about leadership prior to becoming part of the youth ministry team.

This method of learning matches with ideas developed by Malcolm Knowles about andragogy, which is his term for the teaching methodology used in adult education. Knowles challenges common assumptions about education:

[Many educators believe that] if we simply pour enough knowledge into people: 1. they will turn out to be good people, and 2. they will know how to make use of their knowledge...we must define the mission of education as to produce competent people—people who are able to apply their knowledge under changing conditions. . . (Knowles, 18-19)

Using the principles of andragogy, we direct learning to close the gap between what the learners now know and what they need to know in order to do what they want to do. Providing connected learning motivates youth to learn the faith because there is something that they want to do, to which this learning is connected. This style of faith learning also helps youth become lifelong learners because they see the connections between faith and action. Other principles of andragogy can help shape faith formation with adolescents by involving youth in planning for their learning, utilizing the experience of learners and involve them in creating shared understanding, connecting learning to faith experiences and vice versa.

The adventure of discipleship begins with an encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter can't be programmed or scheduled, but we can help youth create the time and space to recognize Christ in their midst. We can also engage youth with the congregation that listens to the Word and acts on it in bold and faithful ways.

Mike Theissen conducted research in the Diocese of Rochester, New York that reinforced this style of learning. He found that the most effective adolescent faith formation strategy was actually a Vacation Bible School program that involved thirty adolescents each year as team members. These youth learned key Scripture and faith themes in preparation for leading children through this week of study and celebration of faith. Many of the programs that they identified as effective had similar characteristics.

Based on his research, effective faith formation programs:

- ♦ creatively and fully engage young people in the learning process, often as teachers or peer leaders
- ♦ are intense and necessitate relationship building among the participants
- ♦ often offer something back to the community
- ♦ utilize the gifts of young people and actively involve the whole person (head, heart, and hands) (Theissen, 5)

Another aspect of this research was the intentionality of each program or gathering. Theissen suggests that communities ask critical questions prior to each gathered program or activity for youth.

1. How is God made more visible through this activity, program or model?
2. How will this activity, program or model bring young people into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ?
3. How can I more fully involve young people in this activity, program or model?
4. How can I more fully partner with parents in this activity, program or model?
5. How can I model and share my own faith journey through this activity, program or model? (Theissen, 3)

Conclusion

The adventure of discipleship begins with an encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter can't be programmed or scheduled, but we can help youth create the time and space to recognize Christ in their midst. We can also engage youth with the congregation that listens to the Word and acts on it in bold and faithful ways. Research about adolescents and faith formation points toward the need for congregations to name and claim adolescent faith formation as a priority.

Consider these directions to help you bring together youth, parents, staff, and ministry leaders in your community to create a shared plan for adolescent faith formation.

1. Assess your community.

- Youth and families: Who are the youth and families? How are they currently involved?
- Strengths and assets: What are the strengths of our community that we can share with youth?
- Areas to grow: What are the areas we need to grow in order to provide dynamic and effective faith formation with adolescents?

2. Develop focused, innovative efforts.

- Choose or strengthen your model for adolescent faith formation.
- Identify your primary setting for faith formation and complement this strategy with other offerings and support in the other settings of faith learning.
- Utilize the assets in your community to provide new methods.

3. Provide connected learning.

Use the calendar for the congregation and youth ministry to create new opportunities for faith learning.

4. Make the most of each contact.

Utilize the five key questions suggested in this article to evaluate each gathering with youth.

5. Work with families.

Provide families of youth with resources to share faith and pray at home.

6. Empower people of vibrant faith to be bold, faithful, and alive in sharing faith and life with youth in the community.

Provide formation for religious educators and ministry leaders so that leaders are empowered to share faith effectively.

In the first section of this article, we named the starting point for faith formation as evangelization. What does it mean to become good news in the lives of adolescents? Good news is not theoretical and it is not general. Good news is something specific and personal. It is something that connects with the bad news in our lives. For someone who is unemployed, good news is the phone call from the employer offering a job. For a parent whose child is injured, good news is the ambulance arriving to help. For someone who is hungry, good news is a bowl of food.

For adolescents, the good news of our faith will be received when it connects with their lives and their world. What are the headlines that youth carry in their hearts? The starting point for any ministry with youth is a stance of listening and compassion for young people. As a faith community we can listen to youth, love them and provide the witness and instruction that guides a new generation of disciples towards bold and transforming faith.

Endnotes

- ¹ Adapted from Thomas Groome, "Of Silver Jubilees and the Ground Gained," *PACE* 25, January 1996, pages 13-20.
- ² See Sarah Spinks, *Frontline* producer, "Adolescent Brains are Works in Progress: Here's Why," www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/work/adolescent.html.
- ³ These principles were developed from findings from the Generations of Faith Project, which focused on effective learning and incorporated the work of Leif Kehrwald, Mariette Martineau, John Roberto, and Joan Weber (Naugatuck, CT: Center for Ministry Development, 2006). See www.generationsoffait.org.

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