

Revitalizing Ministry with Youth and Young Adults

by

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The following is the first of four articles that will appear over coming months discussing the findings of recent projects concerning young people and religion. This first article provides a broad overview of the literature that has been produced on this subject. Later articles will focus on what has been learned about the religious lives of youth, how religion factors into the experience of contemporary emerging adults and significant changes in the best practice of youth ministry.

“There is a new, national conversation about youth and youth ministries,” says the Reverend “Deech” Kirk, co-founder and executive director of the Center for Youth Ministry Training in Brentwood, Tennessee. “Youth ministry is not just about fun and games.” Kirk’s words mark an important shift in youth ministry today. With the aid of careful research, religious leaders are attending more closely to spiritual hungers of young people, and many churches are re-imagining their ministries for youth and young adults.

During the last fifteen years, the Lilly Endowment has awarded a series of strategic grants to help pastors and church leaders assess, re-imagine and enhance their ministries for young people. (A listing of selected grants and publications is posted at www.lillyendowment.org.) Totaling more than \$108 million, these grants responded to concerns expressed by religious leaders, who noted a growing number of youth dropping out of their churches. These leaders were alarmed about the apparent inability of their congregations to hold onto their youth, and they feared that they were slowly losing a generation of Christian young people. More importantly, they recognized that the predominant models for youth ministry – that often emphasized entertainment-based ministries and depended on the leadership skills of a dynamic youth pastor – just weren’t working anymore. New approaches were needed to pass the faith to the next generation.

The Endowment’s grants support efforts to mobilize the talents of thoughtful scholars and creative pastors to examine the religious lives of youth today and to test new approaches for the Christian formation of young people. Strategically, they seek to advance inter-related endeavors: (1) studies of the lives of youth and

young adults to understand more deeply their religious questions and spiritual hungers; (2) examinations of exemplary youth ministries to uncover and describe what works and why; (3) experimental projects to develop new models for youth ministries; and (4) leadership development programs to prepare pastors and youth workers more fully for ministries with young people.

Although these efforts are far from complete, the early results are encouraging. “The Lilly Endowment has been the engine that started this conversation about faith formation,” says Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, associate professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey.

The Big Picture – Understanding the Lives of Young People Today



It dawned on him early in his career, notes Dr. Christian Smith, professor of sociology and director of the Center for the Study of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, that too little was known about young people and their religious beliefs, attitudes, influences and practices. Much less was known about the causal effects of religion that shaped the lives of youth and young adults over time. “As a subject, it had just slipped through the cracks,” he says. “Until the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), there really hadn’t been adequate data to support any assumptions about youth. In that way, the project has been very helpful.”

Since 2001, Smith has directed the NSYR, an Endowment-supported, landmark sociological study of the religious lives of American adolescents and young adults that has challenged many long-held assumptions about youth and shed fresh light on their religious beliefs and practices.

The NSYR research team designed a study that began with an extensive survey of a nationally representative group of adolescents and their parents, involving 3,370 telephone interviews and 267 in-depth individual interviews. By mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods, the NSYR paints the first complete “big-picture” description of American youth and religion and also provides nuanced brushstrokes about the diverse religious experiences and socio-economic circumstances of young people.

Building on the NSYR’s initial success, the researchers contacted the same young people and conducted a second round of surveys and in-depth interviews with the same young people when they reached late adolescence as 17- to 21-year olds. The surveys and interviews were repeated a third time when they reached young adulthood as 20- to 24-year olds. The fourth and final wave, now underway, follows the same group as they reach adulthood as 25- to 29-year-olds and begin careers and families of their own. The result is an unprecedented database that tracks the religious longings and growth of young adults over time.

The NSYR’s findings have surprised many church leaders. American teenagers generally do not have negative views of religion; in fact, they have an openness and curiosity about religion. They also tend to reflect the religious beliefs and traditions of their parents, and they are not particularly interested in rebelling or seeking alternate religious paths.

“Originally, what surprised me most is how not that different teenagers are from adults,” Smith says. “That contradicts the main cultural script we’ve heard for years—that young people are rebellious and there’s a generation gap that automatically disconnects adults and teenagers. It took a real re-adjustment in our thinking to realize how much teenagers need mature adults in their lives and how much they want them in their lives.”

The NSYR’s findings from the first waves of research have been published in two well-received books, Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers with co-author Melinda Lundquist Denton [2005] and Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults with co-author Patricia Snell [2009].

From Big Picture to Actual Practices – Re-imagining Youth Ministry

The reach of the NSYR can’t be overstated, according to Kenda Dean, author of the 2010 book Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church, a product of her reflection as a member of the NSYR research team. Without the NSYR, churches would still be just guessing at what youth need to develop a mature Christian faith. Dean and a growing number of pastors, church leaders and religious educators are using key findings from the NSYR to re-think and redesign their ministries with youth and young adults.



“The NSYR named something,” says Dean. “It gave words to something we as pastors and educators had observed.”

One example, states Dean, is identifying the predominant religious attitude today among the majority of American youth. This attitude, which Smith in the NSYR describes as moralistic therapeutic deism, has five tenants: God exists; God wants people to be nice and fair to each other; the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good; God is distant and only involved in one’s life when a problem arises; and, finally, good people go to heaven when they die.

This version of Christianity, Dean argues, places few demands on individuals and is a diluted version of Christian faith that seems more comfortable for youth as

well as their parents. It’s not an entirely new problem; Dean quotes Methodism founder John Wesley, who noted in 1741 that, “The Church is full of almost Christians who have not gone all the way with Christ.”

Churches are both the problem and solution, Dean says. Churches can simply reinforce in young people a watered-down version of Christianity, or they can challenge them to live out the Gospel by teaching them Christian practices and cultivating in them a strong sense of mission—a seriousness of purpose that the NSYR also tells us youth are often eager to embrace.

A Sticky Faith – Nurturing a Faith that Lasts

Another perplexing question for pastors and parents is what happens to high school students when they graduate and move away to college. Do most young people find new faith communities to join, or do they—as church leaders fear—drift away from their churches and lose touch with their faith traditions? The Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA launched the College Transition Project in 2006 to answer this question.



Directed by Kara Powell, assistant professor of Youth and Family Ministry and executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute, the project has studied the graduates from more than 500 youth groups during their first three years in college in hopes of discovering the characteristics of youth groups that are associated with a healthy transition to college life and to help youth workers develop those qualities in their youth groups.

Initial findings revealed that approximately 40 percent of youth group graduates drift from faith communities during their freshman year in college. “That’s when we realized that there is a problem, and that we needed to figure out—before kids go to college—how to help them have a faith that is robust and lasts. What can we do, as parents and church leaders, to give them a ‘sticky faith’?” Powell says.

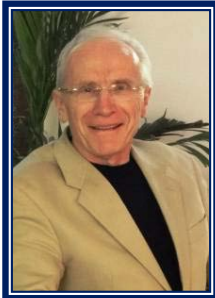
Rebranded the Sticky Faith Project, Powell and the research team discovered three key factors that provide a foundation for a lasting faith: (1) youth develop intergenerational relationships with adults in their home congregations; (2) young people pray with their parents and talk with them about their faith; and (3) youth are involved in mission and service projects that help to teach them how to live out their faith.

Powell and her colleagues have presented their findings to nearly 10,000 church leaders at conferences around the country, rolled out Sticky Faith resources and

curriculum, and launched a blog and monthly e-journal to help connect with youth pastors and churches.

Culture of the Spirit – Identifying What Works

The Exemplary Youth Ministry Study is another national study looking at religious beliefs and practices of adolescents, but focused on congregations. The study asks: Are there any congregations with a high percentage of committed Christian youth? If so, what are those congregations doing to establish faith as a vital factor in the lives of their youth? What accounts for their effective approaches to ministry? Seven denominations were involved in the study.



Through extensive surveys of youth, parents, adult youth ministry leaders and church staff in 131 congregations, as well as on-site, in-depth interviews in 21 congregations, the study uncovered the characteristics of effective congregational youth ministries, according to Dr. Roland Martinson, the study's director and academic dean of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

“What we noticed was that in a society where the church is losing traction and losing the ability to engage a younger generation, some congregations were deeply engaging young people and bucking that trend,” Martinson says.

Regardless of size, geographical location, or denominational variations, the most effective congregations all shared a “culture of the Spirit,” says Martinson.

“It is the spirit of the living God, present among them,” Martinson says. “It is a vital, living, expression that is lived out in leadership, in activities and in the community of faith that has the most powerful, pervasive influence on young people. It is the wholeness of the relationships, values and beliefs of the entire faith community that create the impactful environment that, in fact, forms the life and faith of 12- to 18-year-olds.”

These congregations share other characteristics as well. Effective congregations have ministries that are thoroughly intergenerational. Young people are expected to participate and lead in church-wide ministries, including worship, education, fellowship and decision-making. Age-level ministries are marked by trusted relationships and activities that are intentionally planned to build an atmosphere of belonging. The effective congregations also educated parents in the faith, and—no surprise—counted competent, faith-filled leadership as an important asset.

A lifelong youth minister, Martinson was particularly touched by the comment of one 17-year-old who told him that despite her nice family and good school, it was her church that “messes with my life.” Asked what she meant, she told Martinson that her church family encouraged her to think deeply about her faith and to live out her values in her choices about her future career and lifestyle; church members also saw her strengths and recognized her capabilities in ways that others did not.

In a congregation with a strong, intentional youth ministry, lives are transformed, he says. “Youth can be so profoundly affected,” Martinson says.

Through the study’s published findings in a 2010 book, The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry, by Martinson and co-authors Wes Black and John Roberto, and an online presence, Martinson is hopeful that EYM can influence theological work for future generations.

Creative Experiments – Enriching the Christian Formation of Youth

While these studies have provided important insights into the religious lives of young people, the Endowment also has supported multiple experimental projects to develop new models for the Christian formation of youth. The most notable are the youth theology projects developed in the Theological Programs for High School Youth initiative.

Launched in 1998, this initiative provided grants to 48 theological schools to create intensive programs to engage youth in biblical and theological study and to encourage them to explore the possibility of entering the Christian ministry. Most of these programs revolve around residential summer institutes on college or seminary campuses, and the youth participants engage youth in a rich combination of theological study, mission service experiences, daily worship, community building, and leadership development activities.

Collectively, these youth theology programs have engaged more than 13,000 young people in intensive summer institutes and touched the lives of more than 100,000 youth through conferences and workshops. Youth theology programs are continuing at 31 seminaries today.

Leadership Development – Preparing a New Generation of Youth Pastors

Connecting the research to practice is a continuing focus of the Center for Youth Ministry, which Deech Kirk co-founded with the Reverend Mark DeVries in 2005 to help new youth pastors with some of the same struggles Kirk experienced when he answered



the call to ministry. “We [youth ministers] were low on the totem pole,” Kirk says. “A lot of us thought that churches had it backward by not devoting more resources to youth.”

With their local churches and a handful of seminaries, Kirk and DeVries launched a residency and degree program in youth ministry to provide youth pastors with the theological background and practical skills needed to build up and sustain vibrant ministries for young people.

The Endowment has supported the Center with two grants. These helped the Center create a think tank composed of researchers, project directors, theological educators and pastors to explore the religious and practical implications of the findings about youth that were emerging from research and experimental efforts. The grants also provided funds to help design practical resources for congregations and youth ministers and the means to distribute proven resources through a website and print publications.

The Center will continue to translate key research into practical resources that will assist congregations in strengthening their ministries with young people. It is also establishing partnerships with several seminaries to strengthen and expand its efforts to prepare youth pastors

“It’s been a very fruitful time,” Kirk says. “There’s a greater collective spirit in youth ministry than ever before.”

I. Selected Grants (since 1997)

- Catholic Latino Faith and Parents Project (*Instituto Fe y Vida*, directed by Carmen Cervantes)
- The Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults Project (Catholic University of America, directed by Anthony Pogoreic)
- Communicating Research Insights to Religious Practitioners (The Search Institute, directed by Peter Benson)
- The Connections Project (Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary, directed by Dayle Rounds)
- The College Transition Project (Fuller Seminary, directed by Kara Powell)
- Digital Storytelling and the Religious Formation of Youth Project (University of Denver, directed by Lynn Schofield Clark)
- Exemplary Youth Ministry Study (Luther Seminary, directed by Roland Martinson)
- Generations of Faith Project (Center for Youth Ministry Development, directed by John Roberto)
- The Interfaith Project on the Spirituality and Religious Practices of Older Adolescents and Young Adults (Institute for Advance Catholic Studies, directed by James Heft)
- The Laboratory for Youth Ministry Project (Center for Youth Ministry Training, directed by Deech Kirk)
- The Life and Vocation of American Youth Project (College of New Jersey, directed by Timothy Clydesdale)
- Lilly Endowment Theological Programs for High School Youth Initiative (grants awarded to 48 theological schools to create youth theology programs)
- National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, directed by Robert McCarty)
- National Study of Youth and Religion (UNC-Chapel Hill and University of Notre Dame, directed by Christian Smith)
- Study of Young Adult Catholics (Catholic University of America, directed by Dean Hoge)

Study of Youth Ministry in Black Congregations (Interdenominational Theological Center, directed by Anne Wimberly)

Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project (San Francisco Theological Seminary, directed by Mark Yaconelli)

Youth and Religion Project (University of Illinois at Chicago, directed by Steve Warner)

II. Selected Publications **(grant publications from Lilly Endowment and key partners)**

Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer, Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests (Pilgrim, 2007).

Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, eds., Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens (Upper Room, 2002).

Dorothy Bass and Susan Briehl, eds., On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life (Upper Room, 2010)

Laurent Daloz, Cheryl Keen, James Keen and Sharon Parks, Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World (Beacon, 1996).

Kenda Creasy Dean, Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church (Oxford, 2010)

Kenda Creasy Dean, Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church (Eerdmans, 2004)

Fred Edie, Book, Bath, Table and Time: Christian Worship as a Source and Resource for Youth Ministry (Pilgrim, 2007)

Richard Flory and Donald Miller, Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation (Rutgers University Press, 2008).

James Heft, ed., Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Fordham University Press, 2006).

Dean Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson and Juan Gonzales, Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice (University of Notre Dame, 2001).

Carol Lytch, Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens (WJK, 2004).

Roland Martinson, Wes Black and John Roberto, The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry (EYM, 2010).

Don Richter, Mission Trips that Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World (Upper Room, 2008)

Christian Smith, Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (Oxford, 2005).

Christian Smith, Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults (Oxford, 2009).

Merton Strommen, Karen Jones and Dave Rahn, Youth Ministry that Transforms: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Hopes, Frustrations and Effectiveness of Today's Youth Workers (Zondervan, 2001).

Katherine Turpin, Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith (Pilgrim, 2006).

David White, Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach (Pilgrim, 2005).

Anne Wimberly, ed., Keep It Real: Working with Today's Black Youth (Abingdon, 2005).

Mark Yaconelli, Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus (Zondervan, 2006).

Mark Yaconelli, Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry (Zondervan, 2007).