

Opportunity or Despair? Youth Ministry at the Crossroads

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Outline for Opportunity or Despair? Youth Ministry at the Crossroads (45 minutes)

1. Overview of Session DVD
2. What the Research Reveals
 - a. Introductions Activity
 - b. Goals for this portion of the session
 - c. Current Landscape
 - i. National Study on Youth and Religion
 - ii. Exemplary Youth Ministry Study
 - d. What did you hear? activity
3. Where Do We Go From Here?
 - a. Good News
 - b. Bad News
 - c. So what now?
4. Resources

Supplies Needed:

- DVD and Player
- PowerPoint
- Laptop
- LCD Projector
- Screen
- Colored Paper
- Markers or Pens
- Tape

Learning Outcomes:

What – world has changed

So what – young people have inconsequential faith

Now What – Finding a way Forward

- Culturally/society, our young people do not have consequential faith.
- The point of what we are doing is to help young people grow in faith.
- What difference does faith make?
- Urgency – this is not about youth ministry but about the church.
- Not about kids (busyness, technology) – about who we are.
- In effort to be accepted we've become vague, and lowered our expectations.
- Even faithful church goers do not know the Christian story...
 - ...and don't understand that the world we live in is drastically different.
- There is a way...there are assets and directions that can buck the tide.

Part 1: Overview of session

Play DVD of Terri Elton (First 5-7 minutes). Content includes:

- **Welcome** to the first of several sessions we, the Practice Discipleship Team for the ELCA Youth Gathering have put together. We have a shared hope – our hope is that you, as a person seeking to be engaged in faithful and effective ministry with, for, and among young people, would leave any or all of these session encouraged and empowered for ministry.
- **Open** with Terri talking about a recent visit to Las Vegas - Had an image of it from a visit in the 70s, had seen pictures and heard stories from people that had visited it, and had done some research on Las Vegas today. One of those pieces would not have been enough, but together it made for a positive experience. This session is designed to help all of us get a picture of ministry with and for young people today.
- **History of YM** – As many of you know, just like Las Vegas, youth ministry has changed in the past 50-60 years. Luther League, once a vibrant ministry with young people, is now a thing of the past. It had a role for a time. Yet over time, it was replaced with other forms of ministry with young people. We live in a fluid, changing world where patterns in life come and go. Yet, in the midst of such changes, some things stay the same; things like being in relationship with young people matters, congregations of faith matter, worship and studying Scripture and serving one’s neighbor matter¹. As we seek to faithfully be engaged in youth ministry today, we want to honor the past, but we also don’t want to let it hold us captive and limit our imagination for the future.
- **You are here** because you care about young people – not only do you care about young people, but you have some investment in young people growing in faith. For some of you this is a new adventure, for others of you, you’ve been at this for quite some time...and a bunch of you are somewhere in the middle.
- Throughout **our time together** today we want to add to that good intention a few things ...
 - a **quick overview** of what’s happening with young people with regard to their life of faith and Christian practices. Why? Because the **landscape has changed**. But that’s not all.
 - Many of us believe that this is a **time of opportunity**...a time when young people are open to faith and a Christian way of life...So secondly, we want to give you some clues about where we think faithful and effective ministry with and for youth will be going. Why? So you can **join in this exciting adventure**.

¹ For more on the history of Youth Ministry, see:

Dean, et al, *Starting Right* (chapter 4)
Andy Root, *Revisiting Relational Ministry* (chapters 1 and 2)

- And finally, I said it before and I will say it again, we want to **encourage and equip you** join the young people in your context on a journey of discipleship.
- The **format** of our time will include:
 - Some DVD clips, some presentations by people from your context, and some exercises for you to learn from each other.
- In addition to our time together, our team has developed some **additional resources** for you to go deeper. There will be seven follow-up sessions on topics we think are important for youth ministry today. They will be available in various formats and will have many accompanying resources include books, DVDS, YouTube videos, webinars and websites.
- So, with that said, let's begin.

Part 2: What the Research Reveals

Introductions – (10 min)

- **Welcome** the group and introduce yourself. Glad you are here, some of us are preparing for taking young people to the Youth Gathering in New Orleans, and others are not. Some of you are paid to lead youth ministry in congregations, others are not...no matter what role you have or what ministry activities you are leading, we believe your time here will better equip you to lead ministry with young people in your congregation.
- Have leaders **introduce themselves** in this way – give each leader a piece of colored paper (mix it up so there are various colors in the group). On that piece of paper have each person write the following:
 - i. *Name, congregation*
 - ii. *Memory of “church” when they were in high school and*
 - iii. *One hope they have for the young people in their current congregation.*When they are done, have each person tape their piece of paper up somewhere in the room. As people are finishing...give people 2 minutes to go around the room and read what people wrote. After two minutes, have people turn to someone near then and share one or two observations from reading the papers. Give people 2 minutes to share. As you close this section, count to three and then have everyone shout their name. 1-2-3...Name. Then count again and have everyone name the congregation they are from. 1-2-3...Congregation name.
- Great. Now that introductions are done...Let me remind you of what **our goals** are for our time today:
 - We are going to begin by getting a **sense of the landscape of faith and spirituality of youth today.**
 - Next, we are going to **discover what is important in nurturing an active life of discipleship for young people today.**
 - Finally, we are going to **lay out the future learning opportunities** created to further equip you.

Current Landscape: (15-30 minutes – depending on use of videos and small group discussion)

Have any of you had experiences like Terri – where we’d known Las Vegas in a particular time and place...and even though she knew it had changed in the decades since she was last there, she hadn’t imagined how...and until she studied it further, all she had were antidotes or parts of the true picture. Well, many of us working with young people are often leading in the same way. We have good intentions and resources or experiences from some past era, but we haven’t taken the time to discover what currently is going on. So...we’re going to start today with getting “up-to-date” on the current state of faith and spirituality of teenagers. We are going to do so from two angles.

From the air² –

Ten years ago two national research projects were set into motion to discover what actually was going on with the spiritual and religious lives of teenagers. We are going to touch on some of the learnings from these two studies. The first will give us a glimpse of things from the air. The National Study of Youth and Religion was an in depth study of what teenagers in the United States thought about faith and religion. Here are some of the high level learnings:

National Study of Youth and Religion – High Level Learnings:

1. *Teen are not rebellious about faith, rather they are open to religion.* Yet for most young people faith was not a viable or central element in their life, rather it served more as wallpaper/backdrop of their life.
 - a. Youth are **not flocking to "alternative" religions** and spiritualities.
 - b. The vast majority of the teenagers identified themselves as Christian -- either Protestant or Catholic -- or as Jewish or Mormon.
 - c. Only about 8 percent said faith was not important at all³.
2. Yet, the faith the majority of teens spoke about was not true to any faith tradition or denomination. Rather the faith could be described as *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*⁴.

Definition: “we suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers is what we might call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’ *The creed of this religion...sounds something like this:*

- a. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- b. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- c. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

² As time permits, use one of these YouTube pieces - video clips of teens and Christian Smith and other youth leaders:

- a. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqGkiToWBs0>
- b. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liQaJuhlUFA>
- c. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2b7AS61CUg>

see also the website: www.youthandreligion.org

If you have time, you could also purchase and use some or all of the DVD, *Soul Searching: A Movie About Teenagers and God*.

³ “Adults in the United States over the past many decades have recurrently emphasized what separates teenagers from grown-ups, highlighting things that make them different and seemingly unable to relate to each other. But our conversations with ordinary teenagers around the country made clear to us, to the contrary, that in most cases teenage religion and spirituality in the United States are much better understood as largely reflecting the world of adult religion, especially parental religion, and are in strong continuity with it. Few teenagers are rejecting or reacting against the adult religion into which they are being socialized.” (Soul Searching, 170)

⁴ “we can say here that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity’s misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” (Soul Searching, 171)

- d. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
 - e. Good people go to heaven when they die." (Soul Searching, 162-163)
3. *Teens could not speak the second language of faith* – A vast majority of teens are "**incredibly inarticulate about their faith**, their religious beliefs and practices." In our culture today, faith is a second language...and young people are not catching the faith religions profess – they are not catching the core ideas and distinct practices that make their religion distinct and matter in their everyday lives. In other words, faith communities are not passing on the "faith" in word and deed in their living communities⁵.
- a. "the language of faith in American culture is becoming a foreign language..." (Soul Searching, 268) and
 - b. learning the language of faith will require many things, including being immersed in a culture that hears the faith spoken in the present tense and practice talking about faith themselves.
4. *Parents are important* – For most of the young people their faith mirrored the faith of their parents. **Three out of four religious teens** consider their own beliefs somewhat or very similar to those of their **parents**⁶. "Thus, whether adults – particularly parents – know it or not and like it or not, they are in fact always socializing youth about religion." In other words it is not WHETHER parents are passing on faith, but WHAT faith/beliefs are they passing on? (Souls in Transition, 286)
5. Yet there were exceptions. For the *small percentage of young people where faith was not wallpaper – or was an active, integrated part of their lives, communities of people where the faith is spoken, practiced and lived...mattered*⁷.

⁵ "Especially when religion is structurally isolated from the primary schedules and networks that comprise teenagers' daily lives are teens' religious and spiritual lives most weak. It is, by contrast, when teens' family, school, friends, and sports lives and religious congregations somehow connect, intersect, and overlap that teens exhibit the most committed and integral religious and spiritual lives." (Soul Searching, 162)

⁶ Also "Most adolescents in fact still very badly want the loving input and engagement of their parents – more, in fact, than most parents ever realize." (Souls in Transition, 284)

⁷ "it appears that only a minority of U.S. teenagers are naturally absorbing by osmosis the traditional substantive content and character of the religious traditions to which they claim to be belong." (Soul Searching, 171)

From the ground –

That was a lot of information. One of the warnings Christian Smith, the director of the study we just heard about, gives is...be careful in stereotyping this group of young people. So, while these high level learnings are important, let's make sure we don't let that dictate everything we do. Let's ground this a bit and see what your experience is with young people?

- ii. Get into group of 3-4 and make a *list of 10 things* that describe young people today in your area. (They can be positive or negative; they can be continuous of young people from the past or new developments you see.)
- iii. Post the lists on the wall. Note any themes.
- iv. Now, let's keep those experiences in mind as we learn what others have discovered.

Exemplary Youth Ministry – While the National Study of Youth and Religion was getting going, another study was also getting under way. This study is a bit more grounded, as it looks at congregations, and gives us an “inside the closet” look at congregations that ARE bucking the trends. In other words, these are places where young people's faith is not the wallpaper, but an active part of their life, places where congregations are fostering mature faith in young people. (Show clip from EYM – with three primary researchers)

Here are big learnings from this study⁸:

1. ***It's about nurturing mature Christian Faith*** – This study both reminds us of the goal, the hope, the target, the purpose of why we engage in ministry with young people anyway **and** it offers a robust definition.
 - **Seeks Spiritual Growth**
 - alone and with others pursues questions, guidance and commitment through conversation, study of faith, reading the bible, prayer, small groups, retreats
 - **Possesses a Vital Faith**
 - keenly aware of God present and active in one's own life, the lives of others, and the life of the world
 - **Practices Faith**
 - actively practices faith in Jesus Christ privately and publicly through regular attendance at worship, participation in ministry and leadership in a congregation
 - **Makes the Christian Faith a Way of Life**
 - recognizes God's “call” and integrates one's beliefs into the conversation, decisions, and actions of daily life
 - **Lives a Life of Service**
 - involved in activities caring for others and addressing injustice and immorality
 - **Exercises Moral Responsibility**
 - lives with integrity utilizing faith in making considered moral decisions
 - **Possesses a Positive Spirit**
 - reflects loving and hopeful attitudes toward others and life

⁸ Martinson, Roland, et al. *Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* – book and website: www.exemplarym.com, free webinars and coaching tools.

2. ***Congregations nurturing mature Christian faith had three big things:*** a particular theology, some particular qualities of ministry and some particular practices:
 - a. *Particular Theology* -
 - a. Sense of the Presence and Activity of a Living God
 - b. Emphasis on Spiritual Growth, Discipleship and Vocation
 - c. Promote Outreach and Mission
 - b. *Particular Qualities of Ministry*
 - a. Reflect Congregational Priority and Support for Youth Ministry
 - b. Foster Significant Relationships and a Sense of Community
 - c. Develop Committed Competent Leadership
 - c. *Particular Ministry Practices*
 - a. Focus on Household or Families
 - b. Common Effective Youth Ministry Practices
 - c. Custom Designed, Integrated Approaches to Youth Ministry

3. ***And they worked these ideas in four areas*** – each having particular assets or strengths:
 - a. Congregation as a whole⁹
 - b. Ministry directly with young people¹⁰
 - c. Family/household in which the young people lived¹¹

⁹ As time permits, you may want to share these congregational assets/strengths:

- **Congregational Faith Maturity:** God’s living presence, centrality of faith, emphasizes prayer, focus on discipleship, emphasize Scripture, and centrality of mission
- **Congregational Qualities:** supports youth ministry, demonstrates hospitality, strives for excellence, encourages thinking, creates community, encourages support groups, promotes worship, fosters ethical responsibility, promotes service, and demonstrates effective practices
- **Youth Involvement:** participate in the congregation and assume ministry leadership

¹⁰ As time permits, you may want to share these youth ministry assets/strengths:

- **Establishes a caring environment** – provides multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere
- **Develops quality relationships** – develops authentic relationships among youth and adults
- **Focus on Jesus Christ** – the mission, practices, and relationships are inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ
- **Considers life issues** – values and addresses the full range of young people’s lives
- **Uses many approaches** – intentionally and creatively employs multiple activities appropriate to the ministry’s mission and context
- **Organized well** – engages participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations

¹¹ If time permits, you may want to share these family/household assets/strengths:

- **Possess Strong Parental Faith:** parent(s) possess and practice a vital and informed faith
- **Promotes Family Faith Practices:** parents engage youth and family in conversations, prayer, bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life
- **Reflects Family Harmony:** expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith
- **Equips Parents:** offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equips parents for nurturing faith at home

d. Leadership¹²

4. So what does this mean? Four big Learnings:

- a. **It's about a living God** – congregations were places where God is alive and active, and people knew it. There was God talk happening.
- b. **It's about discipleship** – passing on the faith of this active, living God from one generation to the next generation. There were practices and rituals that congregations had that helped them discover what a Christian way of life is like.
- c. **It's about relationships** – people were always more important than programs. And people engaged each other, both within generations and across generations.
- d. **It's about leadership** – congregational leadership, leadership with youth ministry and leadership within the home. Leaders within these communities shepherded this discipleship process.

What did you hear? Get into groups of 2-3 and share what you heard - both around what was troubling to you and what makes you hopeful.

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- **Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships:** offers parent- youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships

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¹² If time permits, you may want to share these leadership assets/strengths:

- **Leadership of Pastor:** spiritual influence, interpersonal competence, supports youth ministry, and supports leaders
- **Leadership of Youth Minister:** provides competent leadership, models faith, mentors faith life, develops teams, knows youth, and establishes effective relationships
- **Youth and Adult Leadership:** equip for peer ministry, establish adult-youth mentoring, participate in training, possess vibrant faith, and competent adult volunteers

Part 3: Where do we go from here?

There is good news and bad news here. (15 minutes)

- **The bad news is this:**

- The Christian Church – and people seeking to live a faithful Christian way of life is no longer normative.
 - Multiple faith messages are presented to young people on a regular basis.
 - The Christian church does not live in the center of society and the language of the Christian faith is not actively spoken in society. Even if you live in a community where it is happening, you are the minority.
- What does this mean for congregations as a whole?
 - We, as communities of faith, have not done a good job passing on the practices and language faith – of modeling an active faith in a living God, of equipping young people with language to talk about the Christian faith, and of making a case for why being a Christian matters in one’s daily life.
 - And...where once the world could help us, now it cannot. We cannot expect the world around us to do it. It’s up to us.
 - To make matters worse, our “church” language (words like justification and sanctification, words like trinity and baptism, and the list could go on) is not familiar to most, even those within our congregations. New language needs to be discovered.

- **The good news is this:**

- Young people, as a whole, seem to be open to faith and religion. They are not rebelling and not flocking to alternative faith expressions.
- And young people are open to learning from their parents, significant adults and faith communities about faith. They have questions, they are curious,
- yet there is a gap between the WAY we, the church for the past several decades, have been passing on the faith and the WAY young people today receive it. This means two things:
 - 1) People’s actions are important. Youth are watching and wondering and
 - 2) It’s a time to be creative and seek to discover new ways forward...to re-tradition our life together...giving refreshed meaning to Christian practices.

- **So what now?**

Kenda Creasy Dean, in *Almost Christian*¹³, helps us both claim our particular story, one that's odd to the surrounding culture, and to invite us to use our imagination, not for novelty's sake, but so that we might indeed be witnesses to God's good news in this world with the young people in our midst. It's about discovery, for ourselves and for young people, a faith that actually matters. Three things:

- **First** – we, the adults of faith, have to *learn to be bilingual*, as we help young people become bilingual. Sharing the God-story in the language previous generations learned it isn't going to cut it¹⁴. And then people of faith need to help young people, young Christians, learn to "Speak Christian" in the world they live in. This means learning the language of discipleship and practices like prayer and worship and service; this means learning the Christian story, the language of the Bible and what it means as it shapes and guides our life; and this means offering laboratories for teenagers to practice what they've learned, their language skills¹⁵.
- **Second** – Communities of faith need to *recapture the process of passing on the faith from one generation to another*. Dean uses the church word - *catechesis* – to speak about this. The idea behind catechesis is to introduce the person new to the Christian faith to that Christian way of life. It was not about passing on doctrine, or correct beliefs, but it was about making the beliefs and practices meaningful for participants. (*Almost Christian*, 118) This happens through people engaging people, not classroom or tests on theological ideas¹⁶.

¹³ Great resource for taking the National Study of Youth and Religion and moving forward.

¹⁴ "the cultural conditions of postmodernity require the church to function as a bilingual community, conversant in both the traditions of the church and the narratives of the dominant culture." (*Almost Christian*, 112)

¹⁵ Apprenticeship - The practice of sacred eavesdropping

- Learn the language of discipleship (*Almost Christian*, 149-153)

Faith Immersions – the God-Story as decoder ring

- Offer laboratories for teenagers to practice their language skills (*Almost Christian*, 153-155)

"Catechesis translates Christian tradition into lived faith and nurtures the conversations behind the wall [within the church] that anchor religious identity." (*Almost Christian*, 115)

"Catechesis sets out to evoke trust in a person, and specifically the person of Jesus Christ, more than to inculcate religious ideas. For this reason, it submits the whole learner – not just the intellect or the emotions – to divine transformation so we will 'know by heart' the ways of Christ and, empowered by the Spirit, participate in the work of God." (*Almost Christian*, 115)

"From the earliest days of the church, faith instruction involved guides (catechists) who were themselves participants in the church's behind-the-wall conversations." (*Almost Christian*, 118)

- Guidelines for translating faith with young people:
 - i. Best translators are people, not programs
 - ii. Best translators are bilingual
 - iii. Best translators invoke imagination
 - iv. Translation can threaten the people in charge! (*Almost Christian*, 123)
- Parents matter most (yes, we've heard that many times)

- **Third** – The Christian way of life has something to offer this generation. If it doesn't it's not worth anyone time or effort. What is it? HOPE. We, church leaders, need to discover how to articulate the Christian way of life in such a way that it *offers hope* – a new way in Christ. In a world that mostly offers easy answers to complex problems, young people soon discover the emptiness of the world. And it is only a matter of time before they discover despair. Yet our theology, our belief in God has something to say here. Returning to the gospel itself, to the person of Jesus, can help us find our way. No, it won't offer direct, easy answers, but it will help center a way of life that offers more than this world. So dig into scripture, and together with young people wrestle with what it says about being a God-follower today.

So, that's what this series of sessions is setting out to do –

- i. Help you and the ministry you are leading, rest in God's living Word and to evoke an Imagination about what it means to be God's people living in this time and place. And by doing that we hope to cultivate a consequential faith.
- ii. We are committed to helping you help others become bilingual in faith. To put the Christian story alongside the realities of world and to be able to communicate in both places.
- iii. We believe that this process is in a sense helping PEOPLE pass on a particular Christian tradition, not as a doctrine, but as a way of life...one that is modeled by other Christians, one that is spoken in real time and in real places, one that makes a difference in one's life...and in so doing, it offers hope – hope to young people in a world that is filled with fear, anxiety and despair and hope for us, the church, as it seeks to faithfully participate in God's mission in the world in this time and place.
- iv. This is a good time to be the people of God. So, believe, imagine, and embark on a God's sized mission to join a generation of young people in a discipleship journey.
- v. And Remember –congregations matter – you matter, as an adult investing in the lives of a young person!¹⁷ Thanks be to God!

Close in Prayer

¹⁷ “The form, content, and intensity of religious socialization are therefore crucial in shaping the later religious outcomes of those being socialized. And since most of broader American society is not in the business of direct religious socialization, this task inevitably falls almost entirely to two main social entities. First are individual family households, where parents predictably do the primary socializing. Second are individual religious congregations, where other adults can exert socializing influences on youth. It nothing else, what the findings of this book [Souls in Transition] clearly show is that for better or for worse, these are the two crucial contexts of youth religious formation in the United States. If formation in faith does not happen there, it will – with rare exceptions 0 not happen anywhere.” (Souls in Transition, 286)

Resources:

Overview of the History of Youth Ministry:

Dean, et al, *Starting Right* (chapter 4)

Andy Root, *Revisiting Relational Ministry* (chapters 1 and 2)

State of Faith with Young People/Young Adults:

Martinson, Roland, et al. *Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* – book and website:

www.exemplarym.com, free webinars and coaching tools.

National Study of Youth and Religion – website: www.youthandreligion.org And video clips of teens and Christian Smith and other youth leaders:

a. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqGkiToWBs0>

b. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liQaJuhIUFA>

c. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2b7AS61CUg>

The book and DVD also highlight learnings - see Smith, Christian. *Soul Searching*. See in particular Chapter 4 and the Unscientific Postscript. The National Study of Youth and Religion is a longitudinal study. The book - *Souls in Transition* by Smith, Christian and Patricia Snell – highlights these young people they studied as they moved into emerging adulthood. In particular, see Chapter 10.

Kenda Creasy Dean in *Almost Christian* picks up the themes from the National Study of Youth and Religion and offers some insights to what it means for congregational leaders.

**This curriculum was developed for the Practice Discipleship Project, an initiative of the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering (www.elca.org/gathering) in partnership with the ELCA Youth Ministry Network (www.elcaymnet.org). While primary authorship belongs to the author noted above, this is a collective work of the Practice Discipleship writing team: Dr. Terri Elton (Luther Seminary: www.luthersem.edu), Dennis “Tiger” McLuen (Youth Leadership: www.youthleadership.org), and Dr. Jeremy Myers (Augsburg College: www.augsburg.edu). Permission is given to use these resources in your local context, so long as no organization or individual profits from the use of these materials.*

