Jesus isn’t cool: Challenging youth ministry

by Chanon Ross in the September 6, 2005 issue

Cramming more than 50 high school students into a small room for weekly Bible study is challenging, but getting them to talk about sex is not. When the questioning hand of one 15-year-old boy shot up in the back of the room, I braced myself. “Is masturbation a sin?—I really gotta know.”

I was proud of him, but not for his honesty and openness. Talking explicitly about sex is easy for MTV-watching teens. Using a word like *sin* is much harder. As Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, authors of *Soul Searching*: *The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, observe, few teens think seriously about theologically explicit words like *resurrection*, *redemption*, *sanctification* and *sin*.

Smith and Denton’s findings beg for a response from those working in youth ministry. They describe teens as “incredibly inarticulate” about their faith, and they say mainline teens are “among the least religiously articulate of all teens.” Most Christian teens are “at best only tenuously Christian,” having confused Christianity with “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

Given this state of affairs, what does effective youth ministry look like? We must help teens think about, practice and experience the theological details that make Christianity distinct.

A recent encounter with a pair of street preachers in our gentrified, suburban downtown illustrates one such important detail.

“Turn from Hell! Believe in Jesus!” said the huge sign held by a man whose booming voice reiterated this refrain to hundreds on crowded sidewalks. His younger partner on the opposite corner shouted equally obnoxious phrases.

“What do you think of them?” I asked one of my high school students.

“I don’t like it when people are too religious,” she said, visibly irritated by the preachers. Her comment suggested she is one of the many teens who described themselves as “religious but not too religious” to Smith and Denton.

“What does ‘too religious’ mean?” I prompted.

After several attempts at being more descriptive she concluded: “Well you know what I mean . . .”

“No, what *do* you mean?” My unwillingness to appease her annoyed her a little.

“I guess it’s just not my thing,” she said, as if it was a matter of consumer preference. “It’s not a very good way to attract non-Christians,” she suggested.

“What is a good way?” I asked.

“I just think they should be a lot nicer about it,” she said. “They’re sort of offensive.”

“Right, sort of offensive,” I said. “Like when Jesus preached his first sermon and made everyone so mad they tried to kill him. He was, like, sort of offensive. You know what I mean . . .”

It turned out, she did not know what I meant. She knew Jesus was no bombastic street preacher, but this new detail challenged her previous conception and invited her to rethink her image of Jesus as someone who would “go along to get along.” Her furrowed brow revealed a storm of mental dissonance—the hard thinking that precedes theological insight. Perhaps there was more to Jesus than she thought.

We often fail to help teens think carefully about their faith and about the details of scripture, worship and Christian practices. Getting kids to like church is itself an accomplishment, and parents want ministers to succeed at that. Not surprisingly, Smith and Denton describe youth ministers as under great pressure to keep kids entertained.

One common strategy involves front-loading youth programming with fun activities, hoping to sneak in a little Bible teaching at the end. The point is not to do anything too weighty that would turn kids off. Keep it light; keep it fun. Large youth events, like Christian concerts, appeal to youth ministers with their ability to entertain kids while simultaneously conveying a positive, family-friendly alternative to things like MTV. This stuff works to a degree: as Smith and Denton show, “religion actually does

influence positive outcomes” and religious teens tend to do better than nonreligious teens.

But teens don’t need Jesus to be crucified and raised from the dead to have positive outcomes and pursue family friendly alternatives to MTV. Values like being positive, encouraging and tolerant are already widely available in the culture. When kids realize this, and many do, they struggle to articulate the difference that faith makes. It didn’t surprise me that many teens told Smith and Denton, “I guess it’ll be more important when I’m older.”

One student I know didn’t want to wait to know this difference, so he participated in his church’s “40 Days of Purpose” campaign, hoping that an exploration of Rick Warren’s popular book *The Purpose Driven Life* would help. Instead, he reached this conclusion: “I don’t understand why you need God for a sense of purpose, self-esteem, or whatever . . . lots of people have that without God.” This young man was onto something.

Religion may help teens find a sense of purpose, stay focused on schoolwork, avoid drugs, drive responsibly, and so on. These are good and important things and they are all part of the “religious package,” but they are not the point. They are like the paper bag you get for free if you buy the groceries.

Christian faith takes root and begins to matter to teens when they discover the difference the details make. In the Christian story, we discover a fiercely loyal God who creates, loves, lives, dies, lives again, and calls teens into the passionate grace of the baptized life. That is something teens can get excited about and sink their teeth into, but these details are available only in the Christian story as told in the Bible and creeds. Seeing these details alive in the lives of other baptized people ignites youthful passion in teens more than any youth event or personal sense of purpose ever could. Living these details of the gospel is not supposed to be easy, or necessarily safe, but it’s what Christians do.

That Christianity is not supposed to be easy is another important detail that distinguishes Christianity from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. “The God of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not demanding,” say Smith and Denton. “Actually, he can’t be because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist.”

A few months ago a confirmation teacher asked to meet with me. “Can I talk to you about an issue we’re having with one of our students?” Immediately I imagined a long list of possible teenage offenses. “Is the student disruptive?” I asked. “Well, sort of,” she said. “The student keeps saying, ‘This is too easy; it must be the easiest religion in the world.’” In light of that comment I had to wonder if the confirmation program was teaching Christianity or Moralistic Theraputic Deism.

Twice each year, I take two busloads of high school students on retreats at which they worship, walk labyrinths, talk in small groups with adults who care about them, and “hang out” in Christian community. Upon arrival, low-cut jeans, exposed mid-riffs and tight tank tops were exchanged for hooded sweatshirts and sweat pants. The girls breathe more easily, the burden of being cool and sexy having been lifted from their shoulders. This doesn’t happen because of an imposed dress code. It’s *their* idea. Youth group is a different community. The usual social hierarchies have no traction here, because this is Sabbath time. Here everything begins and ends with prayer, and the distinct message of the gospel permeates everything. “Hear and believe the Good News,” I say to them, “Jesus is *not* cool.”

Teens respond to the message that their faith offers an alternative to the world. But this realization requires a community of adults who embody this difference. Explaining that life in the Body of Christ is different is insufficient. Adults must show how to live this difference. Where are the adults and trained ministers capable of leading youth and their parents into the particular story of God’s work in the world?

Good youth pastors are difficult to find. Seminaries do not usually encourage their students toward youth ministry, and most young pastors avoid youth ministry like the plague. Church members and older pastors think of youth ministry as “entry-level” work, which only encourages younger clergy to climb the ladder toward something worth their time. Besides, youth ministry is hard. I lose more battles than I win.

After a particularly difficult night, I shared my struggles with a young woman interested in becoming a youth minister. “I’m not sure you want to get into this,” I said. “There are other things you could do.” She sat in a moment of stunned silence. Then she told me about her college years.

“My faith was no match for college,” she said. “Youth group was fun, but no one taught me anything.” She recalled those years marked by drugs, broken relationships, an eating disorder, sex, pregnancy and eventually abortion. Finally,

with tear-filled eyes, she said, “Don’t you see? If I had grown up in a youth group like yours, I would have had a fighting chance.”