

Christian skill set: The goal of youth ministry

by [Michael Warren](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

The important question about youth ministry is not “Where are the kids?” or “What should we do with them when they show up?” but “What is the nature of our community?” What are the discipleship skills appropriate to those who have moved beyond childhood, and how can a community exhibit those skills in a way that attracts the young and draws them to inspiring mentors in faith? By what criteria will people know if they have developed the religious abilities appropriate to their age?

Young people are clear about what competencies they consider important for their lives. They know that those who wish to participate in sports must develop a clear set of abilities. A person can't simply walk onto an athletic field and demand to be placed on a team. She needs to show the abilities required by the sport. And whatever one's individual skills, one usually qualifies for team membership only if one's skills can be blended into team play. They also know that the pursuit of athletic abilities, though exhausting and even tedious, is no dour endeavor. It takes place in a celebrative atmosphere, where levels of competence are appreciated, acknowledged and celebrated. The exhilaration of achievement compensates for the effort put into exercising one's skills.

They also realize that one must know how to write standard English in order to qualify for higher education. And they know that securing paid employment requires having the right skills for the position. There is no argument about these things; society has taught them these truths.

Young people are often less convinced of the need to develop abilities in other crucial areas, such as in relationships and in parenting. As one 19-year-old told me, “I don't need no marriage course to tell me the kind of person I like.” I hope he eventually came to see that recognizing the kind of person one likes does not represent the full range of skills necessary for a good relationship. Similarly, when I told a new mother I was sending her two books about parenting, she told me (again

using that double negative), “I don’t need no books to teach me how to love my baby.” True, but by itself love may not be enough.

Most of the young people I meet believe religion, particularly Christianity, is an area of life requiring no special skills. Religion, they think, refers to an optional interior attitude. It consists of having nice, loving thoughts about God. The idea that a religion requires a discrete set of practices that forges a distinct way of being in the world—that religious practices, like an athlete’s training, are more geared to developing abilities than a set of thoughts—is something many have never considered. If there is a practice to religion, they think, it consists of a single activity—an activity they reject: attending religious services. In their equation, if you love God, God knows of your love and you don’t have to be part of a religious assembly to show that love. If you do attend church but don’t love God, you are a hypocrite. So the best way to avoid hypocrisy is to avoid going to church.

Can ministry to youth reclaim its connection to the tradition of formation in discipleship as a set of practices necessary for “seeing the Lord”? Can youth ministry succeed in this if the ecclesial assembly does not itself embrace these practices and celebrate them?

One approach to youth ministry is evident in an antihunger effort by a Christian organization dedicated to alleviating hunger and poverty in economically distressed areas of the world. Attempting to involve thousands of U.S. youth in a fast to raise money for starving children, it produced an ad that read, in part:

Make your mark through the planet’s coolest event! More than 600,000 young people in the U.S. will be part of it. Twenty-one other countries will do it. It’s a gathering of global proportions! It’s World Vision’s 30 Hour Famine—the worldwide event you and your group won’t want to miss. It’s fun. It’s free. And best of all, the 30 Hour Famine lets you make your mark on a world that’s seriously hungry. So hungry that 33,000 kids die every single day from hunger and hunger-related causes. Kids you and your group can help save. How? When your group goes without food for 30 hours to raise money for hungry kids, you will save kids’ lives! That’s what makes the 30 Hour Famine a cool event. . . . Don’t miss out on the fun. You can make a difference—you can save kids’ lives.

The work of this organization is admirable, and it has raised young people's awareness of hunger. Yet this particular ad seems to trivialize the energies of the young. The fast could have been successfully publicized without calling it fun or misnaming it as a famine. Young people are quite capable of being motivated by things other than "fun." They can be invited into solidarity with the hungry and the poor in a way that does not trivialize their energies and capacity for thought.

Variations of the message that efforts to be in solidarity with victims are fun and entertaining can be found throughout youth ministry. This ad just tapped into the genre. As we approach youth work, we must ask ourselves what kind of invitation, less manipulative and truer to young people's capacities, might help them to understand the global realities that lead to starvation. To find a better way to do youth ministry, we need to begin by asking the young what they themselves see as the supreme sacramental moment of their church gatherings over the past year.

Here is an example of that better way: A gray-bearded graduate theology student, a former merchant seaman, butcher and barman-cum-bouncer, accepts a part-time position at a suburban New York church: 20 hours of youth ministry a week. He proposes to the small group that shows up for the first meeting that once a week they serve meals at a soup kitchen. They also will meet weekly to prepare a simple, nourishing dish to bring along. None of the young people has ever been to a soup kitchen and none has done much cooking, but they are willing to try. "Don't worry. Jesus called his followers to feed the hungry, and that's what we'll be doing," the leader reassures them.

When they meet the next week to cook, he doesn't need any icebreakers or group-building activities. Everyone gets right to work, since they have only so much time to complete the task: preparing a huge bowl of potato salad. They get to know each other as they peel, cut and cook. When they finish, some two hours later, they join for a moment of prayer. Two days later, as they get ready to take the food to the soup kitchen, the youth are a little anxious. Graybeard's confident smile tells them they will be fine, and during the 45-minute van trip he describes what happens at the feeding program and what they will do. Reassured, they arrive, serve meals and tumble back into the van.

On the trip home, in response to their questions, their guide explains how it happens that such a large group of people ends up eating in a soup kitchen. They sing songs and tell jokes. Over the weeks, the size of the group doubles and triples as more and

more young people join to cook and serve. Parents volunteer their vehicles and their service as drivers. When the group returns to the church, its members always spend a few minutes in prayer for those they have met and served that day.

The questions, conversations, songs and jokes go on during succeeding “food runs.” The kids talk about themselves, their world, the poor who don’t have enough to eat, the rich who haul their newest purchases through the front door and then, when they are no longer satisfying, out the back. Implicit in the miles of driving and the hours of conversation are questions about who our neighbors are, about what those who gather to worship do between times of worship, about discipleship and what it means to take Jesus’ proposals seriously. Eventually, the group decides to spend a weekend learning about how certain social groups are beaten down, about the deeper problems of change and about what the gospel and the church have to say on such matters.

I do not know whether these young people ever call what they do “cool” or “fun.” But I do know that their action is not a onetime event, advertised as fun, but a continual, ever more attentive set of activities.

This activity does not so much flow from the life of their church as from the imagination and wisdom of their leader. But this youth group’s effort to feed the hungry influences the congregation, especially through the involved parents. The parish became more aware of hunger in its area and of the gospel call to feed the hungry. These young people have brought a special gift to the eucharistic assembly. They have modeled the Christian practice of caring for the poor and learning to recognize and oppose oppression. They have formed a loving community with one another and a neighborly concern for those they serve. And, through their prayer times, they have engaged in regular worship.

Many Christian dispositions and activities can be developed through a skill-based approach. Take prayer, for example. When someone interested in working with young people finds a group ready for prayer—wanting to know what personal prayer is all about and to develop some prayer skills—that person might set up a NEXUS (“new encounter with Christ using scripture”) group. He or she can show the youth how to find a space in their homes where they can slow themselves down for ten minutes each day, pick a passage from the New Testament, reflect on it for five minutes, and then talk to Jesus about “how it hits them.” They can then conclude by writing a few words in their journals. The young people can be invited to meet

together each week to do the same thing in a group, sharing with each other what they wish to of their journal reflections.

Or take the abilities required for maintaining interpersonal relationships. What about bringing young people together to develop the skills of conflict resolution (using a lot of role playing), and to do it so well that they can then teach these skills to younger kids? Older teens might want to learn how to resolve conflicts in romantic relationships. And there is much work to be done in helping young people develop the ability to be good friends. It takes skill to listen well to another, to avoid getting defensive, and to see situations from the other's point of view. Harriet Lerner's books *The Dance of Intimacy* and *The Dance of Anger* can be very useful in such programs. This work is deeply Christian if it is done in a context that makes clear God's call to love one another.

Visiting the imprisoned is another good way to learn to care for our neighbors. A group of young people in northern Virginia agreed to participate in a five-week program of roundtable discussions and skits, all based on gospel incidents and their meaning for today. They were promised that after those weeks the group itself would decide what, if anything, they would do next. When the time came for that decision, they had become a group able to talk and disagree with one another—and to celebrate each other. They wanted to continue.

They decided they would visit a facility in Washington where young people were being legally detained. Their leader was surprised and pleased.

The group found that they liked their "detained peers" and planned a Christmas party for them. They also planned and conducted a series of visits in which they and their new friends acted out skits, sang, grieved and rejoiced together. After about six weeks, they were ready for a different project to end their youth group season. At regular intervals throughout the year they had had parties that included a communal meal and a chance to discuss what they liked and what they wanted to change in the way they came together. They opted to end the year with five weeks of various prayer experiences: intense silent prayer and Taizé chants; the sharing of bread and the cup, combined with a spontaneous blessing of one another; Zen-type silence; and guided meditations on gospel scenes.

Involved in this effort was a group of loving adults, all volunteers. As it turned out, these adults themselves needed care and asked for counseling and attention from

the group leader. Not only did the leader meet with each of them privately and call them weekly, but the adults met as a group for an informal debriefing session after the youth went home each week.

Can it be inconvenient to devote so much time to youth? Yes. But the gospel is inconvenient. In our culture inconvenience is considered worse than having the hungry standing at our gates. Is Jesus convenient? The disciples on their way to Emmaus were headed away from Jerusalem, but after meeting Jesus they returned the way they had come. Was that turn-around inconvenient? Probably.

As churches start asking what the gospel means in our own time and in our own neighborhoods, youth ministry will become what it should be: an activity shaped by the gospel, alive to the gifts of the young, that teaches practical ways of living out the faith.