

Passing it on: Reflections on youth ministry

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

Are mainline churches capturing the imaginations of young people and leading them toward long-term commitments to the church? Or do they serve as revolving doors—leading one way into secularism and the other way into "hotter" forms of religiosity found in evangelicalism or non-Christian faiths? What defines a successful youth ministry?

These sorts of questions are being rigorously engaged at, among other places, the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. It offers degree programs, supports research, produces an electronic magazine on CD (Cloud of Witnesses), sponsors lectureships, and holds biannual forums on youth ministry, one on the Princeton campus and the other on the West Coast.

At a recent forum Richard A. Kauffman, associate editor, had the chance to meet with some of the leading theorists on youth ministry—Kenda Creasy Dean, associate professor of youth, church and culture and director of the Tennent School of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary; Rodger Nishioka, associate professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia; and Evelyn L. Parker, assistant professor of Christian education at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. He asked them about the challenges of youth ministry and the passing on of the faith to the next generation.

It's often said that the future of mainline churches lies in their ability to retain their own young people. How are churches doing at this?

Rodger Nishioka: I don't like that way of framing the question, for it seems to suggest that the reason for youth ministry is for the sake of the future of the church. Young people aren't just the future of the church; they are the church today. Besides, if the goal is self-preservation of the church as it is now, then I'm very happy to see it go away. I'm not worried about the future of the church, because the God who has been remarkably faithful thus far will continue to see us through. The

question is: What kinds of blocks are we throwing in the way of the Spirit? Among such blocks: worship wars, poor pedagogy, the assumption that 9:30 a.m. on Sunday morning is the best time to gather a group of young people to talk about the nature of God and their lives, and the idea that control of the church belongs to those who have put in their time.

Kenda Creasy Dean: My suspicion is that young people will reinvent the church with or without mainline presence. But it would be an impoverished reinvention if they just threw the whole thing away. I have faith that young people might be more able to hang on to what is really authentic about the tradition than people who are invested in preserving the church as an institution.

What is the theological motivation for youth ministry in mainline churches?

Dean: I'm perfectly comfortable saying that salvation is at stake. As a Methodist, I have a fairly social understanding of salvation. God's salvation is bigger than anything we're going to accomplish. We're concerned about saving young people, but we're saving them physically as well as existentially. We're saving them from themselves and from their parents and from society—saving them for the work of God and not just saving them from some eternal perdition. What's at stake is for young persons to have a purpose. The kind of annihilation that teenagers feel in their own adolescent confusion can feel to them like damnation. And in some ways it is. You can't really function in the fullness of God if you don't understand yourself to be in a relationship with God.

Evelyn L. Parker: A significant number of African-American churches are just interested in young people being saved personally. That is very different from the sociopolitical climate of the 1960s when the emphasis was on social justice, not just saving the individual. Churches with a sense of social justice and commitment to civil rights were then talking about the community, the African-American people—the churches being a part of that. An emphasis on spiritual salvation alone impoverishes the community, because there are still social problems that need to be dealt with. For African-American teenagers the systemic issues of racism are still gnawing at their souls and need to be addressed.

Salvation needs to be viewed from the standpoint of the freeing of people, not just the individual self. But in many black churches today it's more about being saved personally, preparing for the next life. Some otherworldly language still abounds.

Then you also have a prosperity theology in large African-American churches that is not life-giving. It plays into the consumer mentality prevalent in society.

Nishioka: The theological issue is life over death. Are mainline churches preaching a gospel that offers life eventually when you die and go to heaven and see Jesus, or one that offers life today?

The corporate dimension of salvation leads me to ask about the nature of youth programs. Isn't there a problem with programs that isolate young people from the church rather than integrate them into the full life of the congregation?

Nishioka: The congregation is the last truly intergenerational site in our culture. And research points to the importance of young people interacting with older and middle-aged adults, persons who are not their parents' age, as well as with children and young people.

We are doing a grave disservice to our young people if we continue putting them off in a basement room with throwaway couches. We'll reap what we've sown. Why should young people, who have existed tangentially to the congregation's life and witness, suddenly appreciate and take their part in the whole congregation when they're 17 or 18 years old?

Some of the impetus toward intergenerational activities is coming from smaller churches that have to do things that way. They have been struggling for years to keep classes going for all age groups. Suddenly they realize this struggle is ridiculous; they have an intergenerational educational program just by their very being and they don't have to try to be like the 5,000-member churches.

Dean: Many churches find that mission is a place of intergenerational connection. Mission trips use adult chaperones so they become an intergenerational exercise. Typically in a mission setting you're going into some other culture or some other neighborhood, and all participants are out of their comfort zone. That allows adults and youth to shed the roles that they normally play with each other. Everybody is redefined according to their usefulness in this new community they're creating together and how much they contribute to that community. This levels the playing field between age groups somewhat. It's almost always a win-win kind of thing.

One of my favorite examples of intergenerational engagement is a church that set up a daycare center in a nursing home. And then they involved their teenagers as volunteers. It was simple and it was brilliant.

It should be acknowledged, though, that youth groups are a good idea. Kids need peer groups in a healthy Christian environment to reflect back to them who God thinks they are. They're going to find their peers someplace, and if the church does not fit into that activity, there is a problem. But that can't be the only way we understand youth ministry. It drives me crazy when people equate youth groups with youth ministry. A youth group is one group in the church; you would never think that the women's group was the sum total of the women's ministry in the church. So why do we think that the youth group is the sum total of youth ministry?

A critique I've picked up among those doing youth ministry is that program-driven ministry is a thing of the past, or at least should be. What's wrong with a program-driven youth ministry? And if the ministry isn't based on programs, what is it based on?

Nishioka: I worry when people ask, "What's the latest, great program?" because there is this prevalent idea that if we get the right program everything will fall into place. I once was in a small, rural congregation in Georgia that was worried that it didn't have a youth ministry. I asked what the youth were doing in the life of the church, and it turned out there were eight active young people between the ages of 12 and 18. Three of them were in the choir, which was not a youth choir. Another young person chaired the social missions committee. They identified how each of these eight young people were integrally involved in the church's life. I said, "Excuse me, but I covet your youth ministry. I think you're doing remarkable things with these young people."

Dean: The key word is *driven*. It's not that programs are a problem. The problem is looking at programs as the goal. Programs are a means to an end. And the end is a significant and transparent relationship between adults of faith with young people. By transparent I mean that that relationship is transparent to a relationship with Christ. It serves as a Protestant version of an icon. We are trying to teach young people to see through these relationships to the relationship God seeks with them.

If you were called into a congregation as a consultant to help review its youth ministry, what would you look for?

Parker: I would want to hear what young people think about God and their relationship with God, who Christ is in their lives and how that connects with the people in their lives. And what does their relationship with Christ mean for their relationship with people beyond the church? I'm not looking for heavy theological language. If in their own way they can articulate their faith, that church is doing well.

Dean: One of the tests of Christian formation is having a language to understand your experience, to understand what's going on through God's eyes and through human eyes. I'm just as likely to assume that something good is happening in Christian formation if young people are willing to ask questions about that. They may or may not quite be ready to say "this is who I am" by the time they leave home, but if they're asking questions that put God in the equation and doing that in a fairly articulate way, that's a sign of good Christian formation too.

Parker: I don't want to imply that young people need to articulate a credo. They need the freedom to ask the questions, such as: if God is so great, where was God on 9/11? Adults are thinking the same thing and are grateful when a young person has the courage to articulate it.

What about trying to inculcate biblical literacy? Has the church given up on that?

Dean: Not at all. We may not have a heck of a lot of answers as Christians, but we've got a really good story. And teenagers and the whole postmodern movement understand themselves in terms of narrative.

Nishioka: And teens see themselves as a part of the biblical story. That's why the example of the first-century church can lead us as well. But I worry that the concern for faith formation in a number of congregations is linked to a recovery of a catechetical model, as if memorizing catechetical answers and appropriating this language is the basis of formation. That is really just regurgitation. The strength of the catechesis approach comes when it can be used as a window, as the icon through which a young person can begin to articulate the faith.

I don't want to privilege catechetical language. Young people are poets, musicians, dancers, artists and sculptors, and those expressions of faith are as valid as someone saying: This is what I believe about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the nature of the church and the world.

Dean: The real location of catechesis is worship. And worship is more experiential than most educational settings. The service is not just a head trip. Even in the case of the sermon, there's usually something else going on besides the cognitive. The young people I work with are totally into sacraments. The more they go up and do and touch and taste and smell, the more they are into worship. They want worship to form their whole bodies, the soul and the body.

Parker: And they have no concept of severing the body from the spirit. That's a false dichotomy. Worship is a full-body experience for young people. What the black gospel singer Kirk Franklin did for more traditional African-American churches was to say, "OK, let's bring the body back into worship." Young people led the way in dance, for instance.

Dean: In our congregation we have a contemporary worship service which, catechetically, is worse than the traditional one. But young people sense that there is life in it. These young people don't identify with some of the baby-boomer songs used in contemporary worship, but they like them because they make people move. There's excitement. There's energy. And when people cry, there's space for that.

Parker: I think genuine interaction between the youth and adults assuages the struggle over use of contemporary songs versus traditional hymns. But my own bias is that in times of stress it was the hymns of the church that sustained me. And my concern is whether there will be songs that young people can reach back for when times get tough.

Are you suggesting that the older hymns of the church have more sustaining power than the newer, contemporary songs?

Parker: Equally as much. I really like the fact that Mary, Mary, which is a contemporary gospel group, can sing "Can't Turn Back Now." But adults need to tell the young people that that's not a new song. It comes out of the Negro spiritual tradition from the 1800s, and it came out of scripture.

Dean: I think it's a misconception that teenagers want all worship to be upbeat praise. The lingua franca among teenagers is lament. And they don't get it from Christian music. They get it from pop music. The church missed the boat on that. We have this idea that if it's all happy-clappy stuff, then kids will be happy. All you have to do is turn on the radio and you learn what they're really experiencing in the depths of their souls.

I don't hear any kids saying, "I want to hear a hymn"—but then kids are really reluctant to claim any style of music. Every kid I know will say their favorite genre of music is "alternative," which of course means none of it's alternative.

Nishioka: There is an eclecticism among young people these days that wasn't there a generation ago. Part of the challenge for persons who are trying to get to know youth culture is that years ago we only had to listen to a couple of radio stations and get a couple of songs under our belt. And I was pretty conversant with youth music. But now there are 180 different cable channels with satellite, and there is the Internet and the burning of CDs that are passed around left and right. The youth culture is all over the place. But youth are looking for authenticity; it has to be real.

What's your assessment of the contemplative spirituality that is making some inroads into youth ministry?

Dean: It has some appeal, but it's not for all young people. The appeal is partly due to cultural overstimulation. For kids who are overprogrammed and overstimulated, anything that resembles contemplation is such a rarity that it feels absolutely radical. They don't see it as a return to something orthodox. They see it as a radical statement, a countercultural trend. But many of the youth I work with are perfectly happy being overstimulated; they're so numb they don't know anything else.

Nishioka: Many adult leaders of young people are so desperate for contemplation that they immediately assume the young people must love it as well. It becomes yet one more program that is laid upon youth by adults.

Dean: One of the fallacies in the discussion on faith practices is that spiritual practice means contemplative practice. And that's simply not the case. Spiritual practices include prayer, but also acts of justice, generosity and stewardship, which have a very noncontemplative character. We need to reclaim a balance in spirituality.