

Youth ministry: A contemplative approach

by [Mark Yaconelli](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

Help Wanted: Youth Leader to lead Sunday school and youth group programs for senior and junior high youth. No experience necessary. Start IMMEDIATELY. 8-10 hours a week. Call First Presbyterian.

Every week local churches looking for someone--anyone--to work with their youth place ads like this one at nearby seminaries. Never mind that most seminary students do not belong to local churches, are overwhelmed with school work and are sorting out their own faith; these churches are desperate to find someone who will "do something" with their kids. Punch on to the job listings on the Youth Specialties Web site and you find the same phenomenon: hundreds of churches are eager to find someone who will form their children in the Christian faith.

What's happened? Why are we so eager to hand the spiritual development of our young people to the first person we find who can locate the New Testament and needs a little part-time work? Have we forgotten that one of the most sacred of human activities is sharing the intimacies of our souls, our values and the visions of our hearts with children? This is not a task for overloaded students; it is the privilege of every Christian congregation.

Just as a marriage can be strengthened and expanded or weakened and exposed through the raising of a child, so it is with a church's spiritual parenting. In the formation of children a congregation's spiritual life is revealed and potentially renewed. What do our youth ministries tell us about the health of our congregations? How does the spiritual formation of its children reveal a congregation's images of Christian discipleship? What does it say about the future of the church that we contract out the spiritual care of our youth?

The problem goes far deeper than the neglect of catechetical duties. It is not that we've forgotten how to pass on our faith but that we often can't find any faith to pass on. We're afraid to face the questions, the honesty, the challenges of our young

people lest they expose our own doubt, confusion and emptiness. What we fear most in our youth is not their rambunctiousness, but their lack of interest in the Bible, their boredom in worship, their dismissal of church doctrine. We fear their judgment of the church as trivial, even laughable. We don't know how to respond to their questions and behaviors. In unguarded moments we secretly agree with them, yet we hide our doubts behind the whir and buzz of worship and activities and, like the Wizard of Oz, shout, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!"

But the curtain must be pulled back. If we are to keep young people involved in the church and if we are to renew our congregations, we first must acknowledge that many of our current forms of youth ministry are destructive.

Our current practice, promotion and publishing in regard to youth ministry are still grounded in models developed in the 1940s and '50s for white, suburban, middle-class youth. Although a variety of adolescent discipleship models have come out of communities whose ethnicity and socioeconomic status differ from the status quo, it is the suburban, middle-class forms that dominate the field. Existing strategies of youth ministry are limited and often ineffective because they fail to invite young people into Christian communities in living communion with the Spirit of Jesus Christ; instead, most youth ministries are formed around the following unspoken themes:

- *Entertainment.* The entertainment model rises out of adult fears of secular society and adolescent freedom. This approach is designed to keep kids safe while creating attractive associations with religious institutions through ski trips, game nights, rafting trips and other fun activities. The "entertainment" model readily accepts the values of consumer culture. Programs are created and advertised like those of any secular youth club. A young person's Christian commitment is measured according to the products and events he or she consumes: "Did she attend the fall rafting retreat? The all-night paint-ball fest? Does he listen to Christian music? Does she own 'What Would Jesus Do' bracelets and a matching cap and journal?"

In this program-centered ministry, the staff, parents and church members act as administrators and chaperones. Though spiritual transformation might occur, it certainly isn't the primary focus. Churches are afraid that if they confront the market-driven values in which young people are immersed, youth will be turned off; better to offer easily consumable, culture-friendly programs with a digestible Christian coating.

The results can be destructive. Treating youth as activity consumers often is a way of turning adults into customer service representatives, not ministers. Not surprisingly, the average youth director quits within 18 months, volunteers are difficult to recruit (it takes a lot of time and energy to keep young people entertained), and youth rarely make lasting commitments to the Christian faith.

- *Charismatic youth leader.* In this approach, a congregation hires a minister (usually young, attractive and recently graduated from college or seminary) to be solely responsible for the spiritual well-being of young people. The unspoken assumption is that the youth director is the youth ministry. Church members and parents expect the youth minister to mediate the holy through his or her own spiritual charisma. This model is based on the old bait-and-switch ploy: people hope that the youth first will be attracted to this minister, who will at some point get them to transfer their attention to God.

Such a congregation wants its youth leader to embody all the church's hopes and concerns for its young people. Depending on the constituency, youth ministers are expected to be substitute parents who mitigate the growing frustration and tension between adults and teenagers; hip babysitters who keep the youth occupied while the adults attend to the real business of the church; role models who set an example of Christian living that most parents are unable to match; pied pipers who lead youth into compliance with the values and practices of the adult church; and security guards who keep the adult congregation protected from the energies and disruptions of its adolescents.

The youth-leader-as-savior approach, extrapolated from parachurch ministries like Young Life and Youth for Christ, has generally been destructive for all concerned. Alone and segregated from the church community, youth ministers are soon exhausted. Expected to be walking icons of the risen Christ, they are not allowed to be fallible, and their own need for Christian nurture goes unmet. Left as the sole mediator between the adult and youth congregations, youth ministers quickly become isolated, lonely and spiritually alienated. And even with the most well-intentioned ministers, the bait-and-switch strategy rarely works--teenagers often accept the youth minister as their personal savior but are rarely able to transfer their devotion to Jesus Christ.

- *Information-centered.* This model is most concerned with presenting young people with religious instruction. It assumes that youth ministry consists simply

of teaching Christian content through common educational practices. This is discipleship through spiritual information rather than transformation. The Spirit is never invoked. The youth minister acts as the bearer of knowledge and develops effective ways to dispense this knowledge, just as a high school math teacher would. Methods of instruction are chosen indiscriminately and often are grounded in social-science research rather than biblical scholarship or Christian practice.

Those who succeed under this plan are adolescents who can parrot back the "right" answers regarding the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. The worst forms of this model are to be found in confirmation programs in which young people sit in classrooms week after week, absorbing lectures and "youth sermons" on Christian beliefs. Unfortunately, though such youth programs may convert young people to an interesting metaphysics, it's one they are likely to discard when they enroll in Philosophy 101. The Christian faith doesn't make sense unless one encounters the God who inspires theological musings and acts of Christian love. The power of the Christian faith is that it promises total transformation--body, spirit and mind. Limited to the intellect, religious formation becomes compartmentalized and often irrelevant.

To reform youth ministries, we must return to that which makes the church unique. Any secular organization can provide fun events, dynamic recreation leaders and good moral instruction. Only the church knows how to awaken people to the liberating presence of God. This, our greatest gift, should be the center of our discipleship practices.

In 1993, after completing my third year of working 70 to 80 hours a week in a youth ministry based on entertainment and whatever charisma I have, I was on the verge of burnout. A friend convinced me to attend a spiritual formation retreat led by Morton Kelsey. I knew that "spirituality" was popular, and I went hoping to pick up a few new gimmicks for my ministry. But after three days of silence, biblical meditation and other contemplative exercises, I experienced a life-changing conversion. During a meditative exercise on the prodigal son, I encountered an overwhelming Presence that enveloped me with love and acceptance. In that moment I was the prodigal being welcomed home and celebrated.

My vision of youth ministry changed dramatically. If God was really present with us, then it made no sense to place myself or my programs at the center of ministry.

Instead of asking God to bless my programs, my job was to pay attention to how God was at work and then to follow. I became a disciple rather than a spiritual guru.

I rewrote our curricula, allowing space and time for God in each meeting. Including Bible study and theological reflection, every youth gathering featured prayer exercises and moments of contemplation. I finally understood that our programs had taught plenty of lessons about God but had failed to give kids the space, time and tools for experiencing God. How can young people sustain an interest in theology, the Bible or even Christian living without first encountering the God revealed in Jesus Christ? And how can adults help youth encounter God if they are not themselves regularly encountering God in prayer and reflection?

After three years of training in spiritual direction at San Francisco Theological Seminary and earning a master's degree in Christian spirituality, I implemented a contemplative approach to youth ministry at Sleepy Hollow Presbyterian Church in San Anselmo, California. I invited six adults identified by our 80-member congregation as people who had gifts in youth work. All six committed to engaging in youth ministry as a spiritual practice. Rather than being chaperones or committee members, we wanted to be an intentional spiritual community. We met for an hour before the weekly youth group to share our lives, read scripture, pray and discern our call. We understood that our own desire for God would be our greatest witness to our youth, and that this meeting would keep us mindful of our own discipleship.

For these gatherings of adult leaders I structured a "liturgy" that sought a balance between contemplating God and acting on behalf of youth (love of God and love of neighbor). Our meetings begin with a ritual, such as lighting a candle or singing a song--some acknowledgment that we've gathered together in the presence of Christ. This is followed by a check-in time, a moment for each person to share immediate concerns, events and experiences. We continue with community confession, an opportunity to bring up any hurts or affirmations left over from the previous week.

The greatest part of the meeting is devoted to practice, a time to place ourselves before God and pay attention to how the Spirit is at work in our individual lives and in our ministry. We alternate between two practices. In *lectio divina*, an ancient form of listening to God through scripture, we often use a passage that reflects the theme for that evening's meeting. The passage is read twice, and each team member meditates on a word or phrase that seems to stand out. After a few minutes of silence we share our words or images and discuss how they relate to our own lives

of faith. In our second practice, openings and blocks, a form of the Ignatian awareness examen, each group member reflects in silence on the previous youth meeting and asks God to reveal those moments when the group was "open" or "blocked" to God's activity. This is followed by prayerful reflections by the rest of the group on how God is present within the ministry.

During the following question time the members of the ministry team check their call, usually by discussing, "Given what we've heard and shared, what is God's calling for us this week?" On alternate weeks, the group does some longer-term planning rather than discussing the question. Finally, we close by seeking a deeper intimacy with the Holy Spirit through offering prayers of intercession and gratitude.

It soon became evident to us that placing youth ministry within the context of spiritual formation was healthier and more sustaining for both the leaders and the ministry. Our ministry team's weekly gathering allowed it to tend the fire of the Holy Spirit at work in our church. The prayer practices helped keep our focus on the movement of the Spirit rather than on cultural trends or our own anxieties. Our ministry began to flow out of our lives and our discernment of the Spirit rather than curricula. Gathered to nurture young people in faith, we soon realized that we were being transformed by this ministry. The most surprising development was that people began to make long-term commitments to working with youth; they attested to finding the ministry enriching rather than draining. At present we have 19 people--a quarter of the church's membership--each devoting three hours a week to the ministry. Our whole church is experiencing renewal.

Most important, young people are being nourished in faith within the life of the congregation. Youth who come from the community rather than the church or who don't attend worship now encounter five to eight adults each week who represent the congregation. The young people's spiritual gifts are now recognized by the congregation, and they've been given space to share them. Five of our youth help design and lead music in worship, two serve on our denominational session and one serves as clerk of the session.

Each week at youth group, young people and adults together engage in various spiritual practices. For example, during this past Lenten season groups of adults and youth committed themselves to practicing and sharing different forms of spiritual examination. One group fasted on Thursdays, members of another called each other each evening and engaged in the Ignatian awareness examen over the phone,

another group committed itself to intercessory prayer, and members of a fourth wrote letters of gratitude each day. Our hope is that we are offering young people a variety of spiritual practices and intergenerational relationships that will sustain their faith into adulthood and give them a place from which they can counter the destructive forces of our culture.

With help from Andrew Dreitcer, director of the Graduate Certification Program in Spiritual Direction at SFTS, I designed a three-year project to test this contemplative approach to youth ministry. In 1997, sponsored by SFTS and Youth Specialties and funded by the Lilly Endowment, we gathered 15 churches from diverse racial-ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic and denominational settings to help us with our research. In February 1999 we completed the fourth of five training sessions. At these weeklong events, two members from each congregation have received training in contemplation, discernment, adolescent spirituality, the leading of spiritual exercises with youth and the contemplative structure of youth ministry leadership described above. Here is what we've noticed in participating congregations:

- *Individual spiritual renewal.* Youth ministers report feeling more integrated into the church community and experiencing a closer companionship with the Holy Spirit. Many have also described a radical deepening in their own discipleship. As a volunteer at an Episcopal Church in Breckenridge, Colorado, stated, "I now see a thousand blessings in each day." A youth minister from Bayport, Minnesota, said that she's "now able to find a sense of rest and peace in the midst of her ministry and family life."
- *Redesign of youth ministry structures.* At the participating churches, youth ministries are no longer run by one person but involve between six and 20 adults. For example, First United Methodist Church in Valparaiso, Indiana, went from two to 16 adults who each volunteer more than three hours a week. Members of these communities report how significant their involvement has been for their own spiritual development. A Presbyterian pastor in Oregon stated, "I was very close to burnout. . . . This model of leadership that focuses on a group of people in community, listening for God, has kept me in the ministry."
- *Congregational reformation.* Although designed to shape youth ministries, the project has had a dramatic effect on the structures of participating congregations. Churches have been eager to adapt this approach to ministry

and to leadership in committee meetings, leadership groups and adult study groups. Grace Presbyterian Church in Paramount, California, now uses the meeting liturgy described above in its session meetings and adult groups. Most of the participating congregations have redesigned worship to allow time for silence, meditative singing, biblical meditation and other contemplative practices. One pastor reported, "By implementing some of the tools from the project we feel more like our church work is connected with our life in Christ. . . . This becomes inspiring and invigorating for all involved . . . and the business gets done."

- *Youth engaged in spiritual practices.* Churches are regularly involving youth in forms of contemplative prayer and other spiritual exercises. The youth director at Valparaiso's First UMC reported that junior high school students overwhelmingly named lectio divina as the highlight of their confirmation class. Using clay and other art media in prayer has become a regular practice for the youth of First Christian Church in Morgantown, West Virginia, and silence and Christian meditation are common elements of the youth ministries at Colchester Federated Church in Connecticut.

At Sleepy Hollow the lives of our youth testify to how this approach can transform a church: A 16-year-old boy whose parents are not involved in the church and who once was kicked out of school for drug and alcohol abuse now helps lead the singing in our worship service and is active in school and church. Adults and youth spent two days at the all-church retreat discussing a three-day solitary fast in which six of our seniors will participate as a rite of passage. At a recent session meeting, the adult members were embroiled in a debate over what legal actions to take against the owners of a neighboring property. Finally, one of the youth members said, "I think we should just pray for them." All previous proposals for action were tabled, and the session began to pray for the neighbor.

These "fruits" capture the essence of this new/old approach to adolescent spiritual development. Rather than entertaining them, we are inviting youth to be transformed. Rather than providing a solitary youth leader, we offer a community of disciples who seek to walk with youth toward a deeper intimacy with God. Rather than handing young people statements of faith, we give them the space and tools to recognize and act with the One who is beyond all theological formulations. We are claiming this work as a church, inviting young people into the intimacies of our hearts and rediscovering the indescribable power of the Risen Christ who forms,

sustains and calls us by name, whatever our age may be.