



REACH!

Produced by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Commission on Youth Discipleship

Cultivating a Youth Ministry That Matters: Part V

by Dr. Joel A. Nelson, Administrator – WELS Youth Discipleship

This series of articles has been focusing on cultivating solid youth ministries. Cultivating is a good metaphor because through our ministries to pre-teens and teens, and our emphasis on the Means of Grace, we are preparing youth to grow. Good youth ministries 1) plant early, 2) dig in with parents, 3) fertilize friendships, 4) rototill resources, and 5) get down and dirty with those served. Planting Early, Digging in with Parents, Fertilizing Friendships, and Rototilling Resources have been covered. This final article looks at **“Getting Down and Dirty with Those You Serve.”**

Getting down and dirty with those you serve sounds kind of nasty, but remember we have been using the cultivating metaphor. What it means is that youth ministers really need to assess what are the “ground zero” efforts that will make the most difference. They also need to accept that these kinds of efforts require a lot of hands-on work. What follows are some “down and dirty” areas that if tended well, nurture a youth ministry that matters.



Understand the physiological, psychological, and spiritual turmoil

While some things about each generation of youth change, a lot stays the same. No matter what generation demarcation is used (Gen Y, Millennial, Echo Boomer) there are three things all youth of all times go through: physiological, psychological, and spiritual turmoil.

In brief, all youth go through a time of turmoil as they deal with the bodies and looks God has given them. In adolescence, a lot begins to change in them physically, and youth have real questions about their physical development and whether or not it will help or hinder their fitting in. Psychologically, youth enter abstract thinking. Their antennae go up for hypocrisy. They start to see that what adults say and do are not always congruent. They feel compelled to point out your faults, but seem blind to their own. They can be hyper mature one minute and sniveling infants the next. Their emotional rollercoaster takes them and everyone in their path on a “thrilling” ride. Spiritually, youth begin to question the real value of faith. They wonder if faith really matters because they see how little it seems to matter in the people around them and close to them. They perceive there is a

(Continued on page 2)

IN THIS ISSUE

Resources.....	3
What Should Parents and Church Leaders Do Differently?.....	5
Why Youth Leave WELS.....	6

AND MUCH MORE!

CORRECTION ON WINTER ISSUE:

In the Winter 2006 REACH! article on “Cultivating a Youth Ministry That Matters: Part IV” it was mentioned that the Web site Nooma and its resources (www.nooma.com) were developed by WELS individuals. This is an error. Nooma is an independent nonprofit organization with no affiliations to any church, religious organization or denomination. Sorry for the misinformation.

Comments about this

REACH!

and ideas for future issues can be directed to . . .

Dr. Joel A. Nelson, Administrator
WELS CYD
414-256-3274
FAX 414-256-3899
e-mail: cyd@sab.wels.net

bigger, higher purpose in life, but can't always identify it. The more the youth ministers know about and understand the physiological, psychological, and spiritual turmoil at work in those they serve, the better the youth ministry.



Teach the way they (we) actually learn

So much of ministry involves education and teaching, and unless that teaching truly engages those being taught, the beneficial impact is minimized. When it comes to teaching God's Word, we know and trust that the Holy Spirit is working faith through that Word. Our methods do not improve what the Holy Spirit does, but they can help youth get more out of what is being taught. Every human – irrespective of age – learns through some combination of three basic learning styles or modalities: visual (learn best by seeing and picturing things), auditory (need to hear things and hear themselves), kinesthetic (must move and manipulate in order to get it). Some people are dominant in one modality, some are strong in all three, and some are somewhere in between. In any group, all three learning styles will be present (I have found almost in thirds), so lessons must include methods that accommodate all these styles. If that is done and the learning is made fun, youth and youth leaders/teachers really benefit. Youth ministers desiring to create youth ministry that matters will learn as much as they can about how people learn, learning styles, and how to present lessons that truly engage.



Move beyond "contain and entertain"

So many times, youth ministry is described as a way "to reach teens," a we-go-to-them kind of thing. We think that if we provide youth with slam-dunk programming, charisma machine leaders, a cool hang out all their own, and frenetic activity, they will be happy and remain faithful. This is sometimes called the "contain and entertain" model, and more and more study is revealing that this model has not always succeeded in keeping youth in the church and connected to Christ. This is not just a WELS thing. Other denominations experience this as well. While there is always a place in youth ministry for high octane activity and lots of pizza, these should not be the only "game in town." This leads to the next points.



Make service learning the centerpiece

Almost all youth ministries work in some kind of service activities. That's the way it should be and follows what the Bible teaches about being Christ's disciples. But too many youth ministries satisfy the

service element via one-time, short duration activity. Now don't get me wrong, raking leaves and washing windows is cool, but is that the best we can do? Youth ministries that matter develop service learning activities which involve the youth in much deeper, dramatic, and longer duration ways: researching congregation/community needs, interviewing potential stakeholder/service recipients, designing the project, generating philosophical and financial support, carrying out the project—perhaps over weeks and months, journaling about and documenting the entire experience, and reflecting as a group about all of it when done. The Summer 2004 *REACH!* carried an article about service learning. You can find it at www.wels.net/youthdiscipleship in the "Newsletters Archive." Take a look. It could help you give more meaning to your group's current service efforts.



Develop congregational and community ministry that matters

Youth ministry that matters will seek to engage youth in the congregation's ministry in ways far beyond ushering, baby-sitting, or cleaning up after the last potluck. Now those things are very needed and youth enjoy serving like this, but could teens' involvement be taken to the next level? Could their opinions be formally sought when congregational issues or actions need more input? Could positions for teens be created on committees or boards? Could a group of youth who love babies be trained to make hospital calls on new mothers? Could teens be trained to do readings or dramas in church? Could spiritual teens be involved in home visits on their peers or prospects their age as part of elders or evangelism work? Could teen prayer chains be developed and managed by teens themselves? Many youth today are looking for bigger and better ways to serve in their churches. Youth ministries that matter create the ways.



Get in their face with a smile

Finally, youth ministries that matter will lovingly "get in the face" of youth when they start to stray. If this generation of youth is the most relational we have ever seen, it would make sense that they would respond better to more relational contact when trouble comes or commitment falters. Instead of sending them a letter or email, why not call them on the phone or meet them at McDonald's so they can hear Jesus in your voice and see him in your eyes? Sometimes I think youth "fake" falling away just to see if anyone will notice or care enough to check up on them. Youth ministries that really matter understand it's about the people not the program.

(Continued on page 3)

RESOURCES

Please, be discerning with non-WELS resources. Running all resources past your pastor would be a great idea, especially if you have any doubts.

Stories: 18 Brief Video Illustrations For Youth Groups

\$99.95

This resource is really discussion starters that can be used to set the table for mining what the Bible says about the topics presented. Using these real stories from real teens may induce your own teen group members and/or their parents to share more openly about what's happening to them.

~ Dr. Joel A. Nelson



About STORIES from the Web site www.bluefishtv.com . . . Doug Fields, author, speaker, and youth pastor at Saddleback Community Church says, "I have found that nothing captures the attention of teenagers today more than testimonies from their peers. These 2 to 3 minute stories are perfect for teeing-up your Bible study lesson or creating discussion before your lesson begins. STORIES is just another way to help you minister to the needs of your teenagers." This is a 3-DVD set with 18 powerful stories told by real teens about real life. The students talk about their parents, faith, stress, betrayal and all of the pressing issues they are facing. Each clip is short, so it easily fits before or into your teaching message. Check out www.bluefishtv.com to preview some of the clips.

Parenting Your Teenager

\$149.95



The DVDs and print study guides that are part of this resource share really practical helps on parenting teens in a very visual and engaging way. The topics (Identity, Turmoil, Rebellion, Legacy) are timely and developed within a format that would resonate with parents and teens alike. Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott provide solid insights and sound "how tos" that today's parents would appreciate. While the lessons do not emphasize the Lutheran perspective relative to the gospel's impact on attitude, behavior, and life, and do contain decision theology terminology in a couple spots, they could certainly be used and used well within our settings.

~ Dr. Joel A. Nelson

(Continued on page 4)

(Cultivating . . . continued from page 2)



Don't Bury Yourself in Mud

As with any discussion about what should be/needs to be done in youth ministry, the potential exists to start feeling guilty or getting down,

especially if you are the person called to develop a youth ministry that matters. Don't let Satan do that to you. Take all of the above, as well as all of the previous articles in this series, and reflect. What do you agree with? What do you think would work in your setting? What do you need to

research more? What can I try? What is poppycock? Talk to others about it and for sure, pray about it.

Cultivating a youth ministry that matters begins with getting that first shovel in the dirt. God's blessings on your ministry as you work with the Holy Spirit's power and the partnership of others to plant early, dig in with parents, fertilize friendships, rototill resources, and get down and dirty with those served.

From the Web site www.bluefishtv.com . . . Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott have been guiding and counseling people about relationships for over 15 years. They have been guests on programs including *Oprah* and *Good Morning America*, and their work has been featured in *Christianity Today* and *Focus on the Family*.

The Parrotts worked with the BlueFish team to create a church resource for any parent who has teenagers. In addition to the Biblical and practical teaching that the Parrots provide, 24 parents and teens from across the country were interviewed. They share openly and honestly about rebellion, conflict, pain and identity.

These powerful stories and the Parrott's insights are woven together on 4 DVDs. Plus there is a candid interview with Steven Curtis Chapman about faith and family. Check out www.bluefishtv.com to preview some of the clips.

An Asset Builder's Guide to Youth Leadership

David Adams, Kalisha Davis, Jerry Finn, Jennifer Griffin-Wiesner and Amanda Seigel
Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1999 / 64 pages / \$12.95 / product number 116-W00

Youth are not merely an audience within the church. They are assets to the church. This is the lesson one can glean from *An Asset Builder's Guide to Youth Leadership*. Seeing youth as assets to be developed is key to their spiritual health and the health of the communities/congregations in which they live.

I've made my opening remarks quite a bit more spiritual and church-oriented in tone than is the book itself. Search Institute, the publisher, has some ties to Lutheranism through a Thrivent grant for the *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth* program. However, the aims of Search Institute are mostly sociological in character. This book seeks to reach program planners in various organizations, from church youth groups to YMCAs to civic clubs, etc. Of the forty "developmental assets" identified by the Institute as "essential to raising successful young people," only one is specifically religious. Asset #19 points to the importance of "religious community" – that a "young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution." That is sufficiently bland to be acceptable to anyone of any faith. Other identified assets can be interpreted spiritually, such as "positive values" of "caring . . . integrity . . . honesty" . . . or the "positive identity" asset (that the young person reports, "My life has a purpose"). However, the same features might be used to describe a non-religious young person who is dedicated to helping at a homeless shelter. So this is not a book to consult if you are seeking strong biblical backing regarding issues in youth ministry.

Nevertheless, we can apply points from this guide to our approach toward youth ministry. "Too often, the focus of youth work . . . is on solving or preventing problems," the authors say. "The asset approach concentrates on bringing out and building on the best in young people." Is that true in our churches? Do we do youth ministry largely with a negative goal—to keep youth from falling away? Ideally, our focus for youth is predominantly positive—to build them up in Christ and equip them to serve in Christ's kingdom.

Service is a strong emphasis of *The Asset Builder's Guide*. Youth become leaders by serving. The question is, do we let them serve and engage them in our organizations? The authors challenge us to rethink the role of youth worker or educator—to play more of a background role and to give youth themselves more power to plan and do. Some sample bits of advice:

- "Take young people's input seriously."
- "Form personal alliances between youth and adults."
- "Learn to cooperate and balance power."
- "Build trust between youth and adults."
- "Ask youth for their help."
- "Avoid tokenism. . . . Youth leaders must have real roles that are important and valuable to an organization."
- "Give them opportunities to try out lower-risk, short-term leadership experiences that can help prepare them for more significant contributions in the future."



What Should Parents and Church Leaders Do Differently?

Dr. Christian Smith, Stuart Chapin Distinguished Professor and Associate Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is co-principal investigator for the National Study of Youth and Religion. In an interview with tothesource, (www.tothesource.org), Dr. Smith was asked the following question: Given the strong spiritual interest among teens indicated by your study, what would you urge parents and church leaders to do differently to improve teens' understanding of the substance of their faith and their ability to articulate it to others? What follows is Dr. Smith's answer:

As an opening caveat, I must say that I am an academic sociologist, not a ministry or parenting consultant. I have a lot more analyses of social processes and perhaps problems than I do answers. Different people in different communities need to take the findings of our project and book and figure out for themselves what the implications are in their own situations. Having said that, I think some of the implications are clear for parents and church leaders. And it's not rocket science. If parents and church leaders want teens to better understand the substance of their religious traditions—and that “if” should not be presumed, but considered—then here are some ideas.

- 1 **Be more intentional about shaping the lives of youth,** don't just assume it will happen by osmosis. We found very many adults and religious congregations to take a pretty passive approach to working with teens.
- 2 **Don't be afraid to teach youth, even teenagers.** What we learned is that teens still do want adults who know and care about them to talk to them, even instruct them. Teens listen to adults a lot more than most adults realize. They are generally quite teachable, even if they don't ask for teaching or let on that they're paying attention.

- 3 **Spend time building close relationships with teenagers.** Significant relationships are the center of gravity in teens' lives. They normally will really listen to adults who they know care about them. There is no substitute for spending time with and getting to know youth.
- 4 **Adults should talk to youth directly about what one's religious tradition teaches,** what they believe themselves, and ask youth what they believe. We discovered that teens get very little opportunity to talk about what they do and don't believe, very little practice at articulating their faith. That limits their ability to think and speak coherently, which itself influences how they live, ultimately. So adults interested in teen faith need to create safe opportunities and spaces for youth to practice articulating their faith, asking questions, voicing doubts, etc.
- 5 **Religious youth group programs matter.** Religious congregations and members interested in strengthening their youth's faith need to prioritize investments into youth ministers, activities, etc.
- 6 **Parents should work hard on improving the quality of their relationships with their teen children.** When teens and parents have bad relationships, the religious faith of the parents is much less likely to “stick” with the teen than when teens and parents have warm, close relationships in which parents still set clear expectations and boundaries.

You can learn more about the study and other relevant youth research at: www.youthandreligion.org

(Resources . . . continued from page 4)

What this book lacks is a spiritual foundation. What it has are tidbits of practical advice that might spark our thoughts on issues of youth involvement in the church. (For instance, how about having a delegation of teens serve as an advisory committee to the church council?)

I don't know if I'd pay \$12.95 for *The Asset Builder's Guide to Youth Leadership* ... but if some grant-funded agency near you is giving away copies, it might be worth your time to browse for ideas.

The review of The Asset Builders Guide to Youth Leadership was done by Rev. David Sellnow, Professor of Religion, History, and Philosophy at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN.

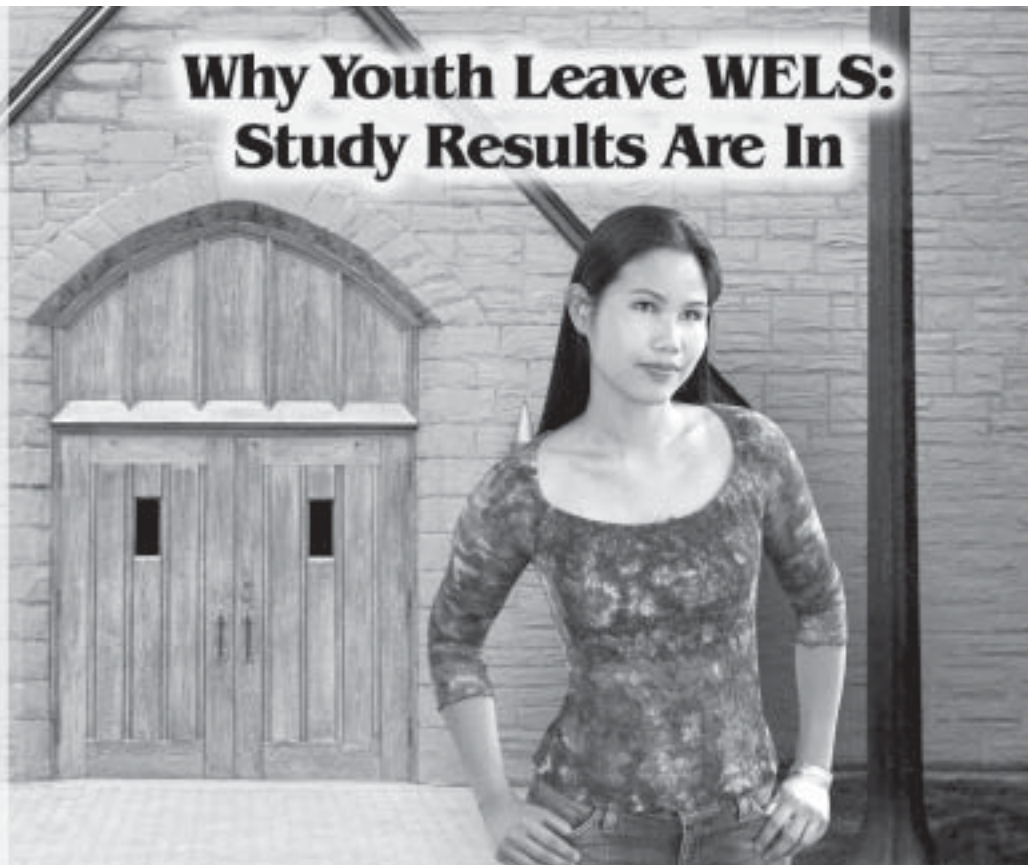
REACH!

Go to www.wels.net/jumpword/youthstudy to download the report and recommendations from the 2005 national research study on why youth leave the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). You can also see an executive summary and the special news releases sent out by WELS.

The research study was conducted by an independent/non-WELS research firm at the request of WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship (CYD) in response to a 2003 WELS Convention resolution. Many of the recommendations can be wholeheartedly considered. Some must be viewed more carefully as they are held up to the light of God's Word. All of the report can provide a catalyst for reflection, discussion, evaluation, and improvement.

Watch for more suggestions from CYD for how to use this study in your own ministry settings.

Why Youth Leave WELS: Study Results Are In



Please contact us with any questions or for further information.