

12. These thoughts have been very much influenced by Norman (2005) and in personal conversations with her.
13. Luke 10:40-42
14. Penner and Overholt, 10.
15. This point is based on Reginald Bibby's 2000 data as recorded in Penner and Overholt's *Soul Searching the Millennial Generation*. They also note that: 48% of teens have a friend who suffers severe depression, 46% have a friend with a serious drug or alcohol problem, 41% have a friend who has attempted suicide, 32% experience physical abuse at school, 31% experience physical abuse at home, 26% experience sexual abuse and 24% gang violence.
16. Gavin Will, "Teen Trouble," *Maclean's* (Mar 1st, 2004), 26.
17. Penner and Overholt, 72.
18. Barbara Coloroso, *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2002), 122.
19. This illustration is adapted from Penner and Overholt, 132.
20. This is from Bibby's data as cited by Penner and Overholt, 15.
21. This is quoted with Bethany's permission.
22. Penner and Overholt, 13.
23. Jason Gardner, "Mind the Gap," The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity Website. Online Article, 2.
24. Adapted from Mark Greene's comments in "Imagine: How Can We Reach the UK?" (London: The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2004).

Connecting Young People and the Gospel



How Trinitarian Love
Shapes Youth Ministry

VALERIE MICHAELSON

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Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*. San Diego: LuraMedia, 1984. This book of prayers has been around for a while, but teens love it. Whenever I read these prayers, they ask for copies and bring them home.

Laurie Polich, *Small Group Q's*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. This is a great book of user-friendly Bible studies that I keep on hand for the nights I just don't have time to plan. (And believe me, if you're human, you'll have those youth nights, too.)

The Comprehensive Guide to Youth Ministry Counselling. Group, 2002. One of the worst mistakes a youth worker can make is to pretend to know more than they do when a teen is really in trouble. This comprehensive book gives basic information on issues such as abuse, eating disorders, suicide, stress and many others with advice on how to help and when to refer. It also gives excellent ideas on how to raise these issues with your teens and is based on solid biblical principles.

The Ungame (teens version) from Talicor Inc. A great card game with icebreaker questions to encourage people to get acquainted; and deeper questions to encourage sharing feelings and talking about values.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Youth Specialties: www.youthspecialties.com. The slogan for Youth Specialties is "Real help for real ministry." They've been at this for a long time and their site directs you to all kinds of resources for youth ministry, including conferences, books, discussions and more.

EVERY TIME I PARTICIPATE in an Anglican baptismal service, I am moved deeply by the promises the parents and godparents make on behalf of each child. But what blows me away each and every time is when the priest asks:

Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?

And the entire congregation answers: *We will*. They then continue with the service, but I always feel like standing up and shouting: *Does anyone know what has just happened here?* We baptize infants and we make these promises usually without a second thought. But what happens when this cute little baby grows up and stops coming to church? When she dyes her hair blue and pierces herself in more places than we believed were possible? Or when the church becomes distracted with building projects or unmet budgets and looks for a place to cut funds? Surely cutting the part-time youth worker would be a harmless way to save some money? Will we still remember the promises we make at baptism to do "all in our power" to support each child in her life in Christ? Because these promises will still bind us. One natural outcome of these baptismal promises many of us have made is supporting youth ministry with everything we've got.

It is all very well to say we want to support our youth, but quite frankly, many of us wonder where to begin. We wish for a step by step handbook telling us how to have a "successful

Resources

FOUNDATIONAL READING

Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. Creasy Dean's great strength is something that is often sadly missing in youth ministry—she grounds the whole thing in a strong *theology* based on the passion of Christ. She offers fresh new models for youth ministry that really take discipling seriously. This is a fantastic book!

Mark DeVries, *Family Based Youth Ministry: Reaching the Been-there, Done-that Generation*. IVP, 1994. This outstanding book about youth ministry is one of the most helpful things I have ever read. Mark DeVries makes a strong case for the entire, intergenerational church family being deeply involved in and committed to youth ministry. He presents a way of approaching youth ministry that is transferable to any church context and that puts involving teens in the life of the church at the heart of youth ministry. I'm trying to get my whole church to read this book!

James Houston, *The Mentored Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002. A rich discussion of mentoring as discipleship in the Christian tradition. A heavy read, but well worth it, especially as we reflect on our roles as mentors and leaders.

Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. Vintage Books, 2000. Written by two secular sociologists, Howe and Strauss have extraordinary insight (backed by solid research) into the Millennials, the generation of teenagers who fill our high schools today. Although you have to do the theology on your own, the background material is extremely helpful in understanding today's young people.

Practical Application

PRAY: Pray for your youth leaders, for your youth, for their parents, their schools, their teachers and their friends. Build your ministry on the foundation of prayer and expectantly ask for God's guidance and blessing.

RESOURCES: While there is no magic formula for youth ministry, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Along with Bibles, invest in some good resources (Bible study guides, group building activities, etc.) But don't limit yourself to the "youth section" in your local Christian bookstore. Young people can handle—in fact, they yearn for—the kind of meaty theology that isn't typically marketed toward them. The Resources section at the back of this booklet will give you some ideas. Many churches are strapped for money—don't panic! You don't need to start with a lot, and resources can often be borrowed from your church, or from your diocesan or denominational headquarters library, or downloaded free from the internet.

TRUST: Some of the most important things God does in young people's lives are things we don't see for years. It is tempting to get discouraged: "Do they *get* it? Are they even *listening* to me?" Trust that God loves these young people even more than you do, and is at work far beyond what you can ask or imagine.

SCRIPTURE: The joy of discovering the scriptures does not happen through Bible studies that are formulaic or motivate us with guilt. But when we encourage our youth to enter the

the depth of my questions and more unconditional love than I had ever experienced. I was received as I was, where I was. These people showed me the love of Jesus before I knew it was Jesus I was looking for.

I realize now that my experience was unusually good. I have discovered that far too many people are turned off, angered, offended, hurt or simply bored by their experience with Christians and the church. But it does not have to be that way. I know, because I have experienced it. And I have witnessed the love of Jesus, incarnated through God's people, transform the lives of young people all across the country.

This is my dream:

That we would foster youth ministries that meet young people in the depth of their spiritual longing, complex questions, relational brokenness and boundless energy.

That we would facilitate Christian communities where youth are safe to be who they are, and are encouraged to become all that they can become.

That these same youth would become disciples of Jesus, and incarnate this same healing love into their local high schools, colleges and universities.

That we would encourage them to discover their unique gifts, equip them as leaders, and empower them for ministry in the church and in the world around us.

That these same teenagers would go on to become leaders in our community—teachers, homemakers, construction workers, lawyers, pastors, youth workers, relief workers, politicians...

Teenagers

Teenagers today, born in the late 80's and early 90's, are some of the first of a generation that is widely being called "The Millennials." For them, money has always come from a machine, there has always been a microwave in the kitchen, "cut and paste" is done with a mouse, not scissors and glue and *dis* is not a prefix but a verb. For these teens, two dollars has never come in paper form and "The Dead Kennedys" is not a reference to a well-known US family. For them, the expression "You sound like a broken record" is utterly and totally lost.

In their book *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Neil Howe and William Strauss describe this generation as "unlike any other youth generation in living memory."³ Calling it a "good news revolution," Howe and Strauss predict that this generation, while promoting teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct, is going to rebel "by behaving not worse, but better. Their life mission will not be to tear down old institutions that don't work, but to build up new ones that do."⁴ What great news for the church!

Despite these encouraging words, however, many adults are afraid of youth. The music they listen to often makes us cringe and their vocabulary makes us wish they came with subtitles. The media bombards us with stories about teenage gangs, drugs and violence. Mark Yaconelli writes:

We watch videos and movies that portray young people as hormone-driven, sex-crazed nymphs... We see teenagers in baggy jeans and oversized jackets and fear they're hiding

MENTORING: Encourage and facilitate mentoring between younger and older church members. Having a clear structure and guidelines will often provide freedom in which the relationship can thrive. (For example, some guidelines might be to find out each other's birthdays and send a card or to have lunch together and share stories once a term.)

TELL YOUR STORIES: Host a day of stories during which teens and elderly people share stories of their faith journeys. Bring lots of pictures and lots of food—the grand icebreaker in any event.

LISTEN: Listen to each other with love and respect. Listen to each other's music (especially when they make a CD for you) with love and respect.

FUN: Have fun together. One of my favourite youth events in a parish is to have a progressive dinner in which six or seven families host a 25 minute portion of a meal. Over the course of an evening, the youth in the parish journey from home to home, meet seniors, children and everyone in between while eating fun courses of a meal (at the first house, appetizers, then the next house, salad). By the time you get to dessert, the youth have probably been in the homes of more parish families than their parents have, and the difference Sunday morning when they see each other again is extraordinary. Once you have shared a meal in someone's home, it's hard to feel like strangers ever again.

reminded that this same teenage adrenaline coursed in the blood of many of our favourite Bible characters whom we would call wild and reckless (at best) if they showed up in our church pews today: David as he took on Goliath, Esther as she risked her life for the Jewish people, and Mary as she embraced God's plan, with the scandalous pregnancy and all that entailed.

When we begin to know the hearts of our youth, we see that their needs are so much like our own—to be loved without limits, to be accepted as we are and to be challenged to be all that we can be in God's Kingdom. Most of the issues we help youth work through are not *youth* issues but *human* issues. And while it may be packaged differently, the heart of youth ministry is the same as the heart of any other ministry—walking together in the messiness of our lives and encouraging one another to know and love God.

Practical Application

CHEER! Be an advocate for youth and make sure they know you support them. Praise their accomplishments in the church bulletin. Send graduation cards, not just from the youth leader but from the whole church. Let them know they belong and that the community is richer for their presence.

EQUIP: Many youth have extraordinary leadership gifts. Help them to recognize their own gifts and invest in them. Teach them how to exegete the Scriptures, preach a sermon, lead a small group or teach Sunday School (not just as token helpers, but really teach.) Disciple them to go deep in their relationship

It means supporting young families and marriages. It means caring for seniors, shut-ins and the physically, mentally and financially challenged, right along with children, youth, young adults and middle-aged people. It is not one or two clergy who do this caring, or even a “professional” pastoral care team. What we need in our churches are whole communities who are going to care for each other through all the joy, pain, struggles and achievements in their lives. Youth ministry will only truly thrive when we foster communities in which a newborn baby and a 99-year-old, and every one in between, are received and belong.

Clarence has been the verger at St. James’ for over 15 years. Now he’s bringing his own grandchildren to church. Clarence is the most natural intergenerational connector I have ever seen. He knows the name of every child in the church, and every one of them who can walk more than two steps on his own follows him around like he’s the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Maybe this is because he lets them ring the church bell. Or maybe it’s because he sneaks them cookies from the kitchen before the service is over. But more than anything, I think it’s because he talks with them every single time they come into the church, and he loves them unconditionally. You may wonder if this has anything to do with youth ministry, but believe me, it does. I talk with so many teens who have grown up in the church, but now they’d rather sleep late on Sunday mornings, or they’d rather be with their friends, or they’re just not interested any more. Many of them have been confirmed, but they’re not sure they even believe in God. Sometimes I call

Leaders

Youth ministry has come a long way in the past 30 years. So have youth leaders. To be able to talk about youth ministry as a vocation in itself, rather than as a stepping stone to ordination, is a wonderful leap forward for the church. The average church used to have its youth leaders turn over at least once a year, but these days many youth leaders are sticking around long enough to really be part of a rich conversation. And it is exciting.

Still, there are some disturbing trends among youth workers, as Tony Jones identifies in his book *Soul Shaper*:

- Instead of nurturing a spiritual intimacy with the Lord, many youth workers display compulsiveness to do more, work harder, and be better. This inevitably leads to exhaustion and despair.
- Often there is a belief that youth workers should be strong enough Christians to do it all on their own and that sharing or asking for help is weakness.
- Many lack a safe place to wrestle with issues, a safe person to be honest and accountable with.
- Many are striving to live up to the stereotypical fun, charismatic, extroverted, cool youth worker, instead of recognizing their own giftedness and ministering in their own unique way.
- Most have little sense of the importance of taking a Sabbath in one form or another. They are forgetting that resting in God is required of us—constant productivity is not.
- Many carry the false belief, Who I Am = What I Do.⁷

when everything gets back to normal. It is no wonder so many people find their experience of church so unsatisfying.

But however tempting it may be, giving up on the church is simply not an option. Jason Gardner writes:

The Church is not just a model of how community should be—it is God’s ordained *modus operandi* for expressing the Gospel of his Son to the world, and for revealing himself to the world in the Trinity.²³

If this is true—and I believe that it is—then the same church so many find “unimpressive” is the very thing God has ordained as *the* life-giving context for living out the Christian faith.

Youth have much to teach as we look for creative, fresh ways to worship. But it is simply untrue that in order to get youth interested in worship we have to look like the culture around us. And we are not doing our youth any favours if in inviting them to become disciples of Jesus we don’t offer them any connection with the way Christians have lived and worshipped for the past 2000 years. There is no formula for finding a meaningful way forward in worship in our churches. But here is one ground rule: there must always be a place for both the old and the new. We are people both rooted in a rich and deep tradition *and* people who are following the Spirit of God who makes all things new. Matt Redman and U2 don’t necessarily win out over Bach and Wesley any more than the Book of Common Prayer language wins out over the prayers of the people being done in a rap. We are not looking to recycle the

Practical Application

VOLUNTEERS: Don’t use *youth* or *coolness* as criteria for recruiting youth volunteers. Look for people who genuinely love youth and can see the beauty in them, even when they may have trouble seeing it themselves. Some of the most gifted volunteers I have seen in youth ministry have gray hair and wrinkles.

SUPPORT: Establish a support team for the ministry leaders in your parish to help with practical matters like chaperoning, driving, providing snacks, etc. Most importantly, the support team should encourage, pray for and support the youth and leaders.

EQUIP YOUR LEADERS TO BE THE BEST THEY CAN BE: Find the money to sponsor them to go to conferences, take courses, and grow in their relationship with God.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR VOLUNTEERS: Volunteer youth leaders are generally a special, committed bunch. If you want to keep them, take care of them. Make sure they are supported with prayer and encouragement. Don’t let your volunteers burn out.

ENCOURAGE MALE LEADERS AND ROLE MODELS: There are many wonderful fathers and male role models (such as teachers, coaches, and friends) who make a huge impact on the lives of teenagers. At the same time, the sad reality is that there are far too many male teens who do not have positive male role models or father figures in their lives. (The same may be said, though perhaps to a lesser extent, for female role models.)

At St. James', we begin every year of youth group by establishing a covenant of respect, confidentiality, commitment and listening. We write it together, and once we have all agreed and signed it, we hold each other accountable throughout the year. Everyone knows that wherever they are on their faith journey, they are in a safe place to ask whatever questions they have and to speak whatever is on their minds.

TEACH AND MODEL RELATIONSHIP SKILLS: Helping our youth learn to listen, express themselves, communicate and relate is vital to the health of their spiritual lives. So a vital part of our youth program is to give concrete tools to help youth with boundaries, relationships, sexuality, bullying, communication, self-esteem and much more. For many of these teens, they're not going to learn about this stuff anywhere else.

MAKE RELATIONSHIPS A PRIORITY: Model appropriate vulnerability, honest communication, forgiveness and the priority of relationships in your own life. This includes letting youth see that you are caring for your closest relationships—your family, marriage, children, friendships, and, of course, taking care of yourself.

STICK AROUND: To really go deep in relationships, youth leaders need to stick around long enough not only to know the youth, but to be known themselves. Five years is a good first phase for a youth minister. For real depth and stability in your ministry, strive for at least twice that long.

Incarnation

I stumbled into my first youth ministry job with no resources, no experience and no idea what I was supposed to do with these teenagers. But they knew what they wanted to do with me: hang out. And so we did. We hung out at coffee shops. We hung out at the soup kitchen. We hung out in Lighthouse Park, on camping trips, in the youth room and at the church. Sure, we did Bible studies, we worshipped together, we had intense theological discussions, but that was all an aside. For seven years, the youth at St. Francis-in-the-Wood in Vancouver taught me the spiritual discipline of hanging out.

I have since come to understand that the theological word for hanging out is incarnation—word become flesh. In Jesus, God took a radical step. Susan Norman writes:

He stopped sending verbal messages through his prophets and instead sent us a person—his beloved Son—to speak his message to us and to live his message in our midst... The Incarnation reminds us that God chose to teach and live his love in the flesh.⁸

So too for us, incarnation is the way we walk alongside each other, seeking to live out the gospel message in everyday lives.

Over the years, I have had youth come back and say, “Do you know what really made a difference in my life?” I have never been told it was a sermon or biblical insight. But the

with the hard work, forgiveness and commitment that are really required to make relationships and community work. But community is what young people are longing for. In fact, Reginald Bibby's 2000 survey reveals that youth place a higher priority on friendship and relationships than anything else in their lives.²⁰ They are onto something big! The God of the Trinity calls us to find our very identity in our relatedness to one another, to ourselves and at the deepest level, to him.

I've known Bethany since she was 15. Now she's in her third year at Trent University, but she comes by whenever she is back in town. Having no church background, Bethany came to youth group consistently, week after week after week. So I asked her: "What made you keep coming all those years? Why are you still hanging around now?" This is what she said:

At the time I'm not sure I realized how significant the relationships I was forming in youth group were to my life. In high school, we didn't hang out outside youth group. Now that we're free not to see each other, we hang out all the time. Most places in the world people don't get to know us. It's so good to have people who have known you forever, people you don't always have to start over with and explain everything to.²¹

The relationships we make as young people become the foundation of what we learn relationships and community *can* be. And when we use the model of the relationship among Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit as what we are striving for in all of our relationships, suddenly our standards are

Having said that, this emphasis on relationships doesn't mean we give up on teaching.¹¹ Jesus definitely was the master of hanging out, but he didn't *only* hang out. He was also very intentional as a teacher and used many different teaching strategies: parables, stories, and questions, to name but a few. In youth ministry, we need to be disciplined in thinking of creative new ways of telling God's age-old story. We must plan solid Bible discussions and ask intentional questions that will challenge our youth to really think deeply about who they are and what they believe. And we need to root them in what Christians have believed for over 2000 years and give them a clear sense that the call to follow Jesus is far bigger than our own little pocket of space and time. If we are *only* hanging out, we are selling our youth short. But to keep our ministry truly incarnational, we must never lose sight of our call to journey together. We listen, we pray, we interact and we share our stories and our lives.¹²

Many of us are more comfortable with Kingdom tasks than with Kingdom relationships. We identify with Martha more than with Mary,¹³ and we underestimate the transformational value of being together, of simply "hanging out." We want to build programs and create exciting web pages. Let's face it, we want to have something to show for ourselves at the end of the day other than a large coffee bill. But if God-with-us is truly the model, Jesus walking alongside us in every part of our lives, then the best of youth ministry will be incarnational to the core. The measure of incarnational ministry is usually not time spent in the office. God is at work in high school cafeterias and

Trinity

Reflecting on each person of the Trinity is a good litmus test for the whole of our ministry. Because—let’s face it—most of us have our “personal favourite” among the Holy Three! We might feel entirely comfortable emphasizing God as our Creator, but we break out in a cold sweat when that experiential Spirit sneaks in. Or we might love to talk about Jesus—so much so that God the Father and the Spirit don’t get more than a cursory mention a few times a year.

There is a danger of taking this compartmentalization even further. One example is when we focus entirely on just one part of the Christian message, like the cross. We want to get the group saved before it’s too late! No matter how central this piece is (and the cross is certainly central to the Christian story), if we forget that, along with being our saviour, Jesus is also a teacher, healer, storyteller and friend, the faith we invite youth into is poorer.

We must avoid judging each other and our ministries. And this is all too easy to do. The youth group down the street might well be running a soup kitchen, the group at the church around the corner may be worshiping using incense and Taizé chant. Another youth group in town may have all gone on a Holy Spirit weekend while your own group stays home to exegete the culture around us and do inductive Bible studies. The appropriate response is to give thanks to God and to learn and grow from what God is doing in other places.

Our Triune God holds us accountable because Father, Son and Holy Spirit refuse to be separated out. They demand that

DON’T PUSH: One disappointing reality is that some of the youth will love to hang out, but will never be interested in talking about the spiritual stuff. And it is not our job to force kids who are not interested in spirituality to talk about it. I have invested a small fortune at Tim Horton’s buying drinks and donuts, and building relationships with kids who want to talk about everything from basketball to anxiety about the future but who still, as I write this, resist talking about God. But we keep hanging out. And while I often will ask probing questions, if they really are not interested in talking about Jesus it is God’s business and not mine. My task is to be faithful, to walk with whomever God brings my way, wherever they are on their journey, and trust that God is the one in charge.

YOU SET THE TONE: As much as we hope our groups will be places where seekers feel comfortable, we must be careful not to be so seeker sensitive that the Christian kids in the group feel out of place. Often this is a hard balance to strike, and it is worth reflecting on carefully and prayerfully. The balance can shift from week to week as the kids change their minds about where they are with God, but as leaders, we must offer them stability and a consistent message of God’s story and of God’s love.

I know this works because I have seen it. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, I have seen lives transformed, one by one, person by person, because of the loving relationships youth were invited into, and the people who walked by their sides.

Practical Application:

FOOD IS A MUST! If budget is tight, ask parishioners and parents to take turns bringing the youth group snack. Don't always resort to packaged cookies and bags of chips—home-baked cookies and snacks that you prepare together (like nachos, sundaes, pizzas, and anything else with lots of toppings) do wonders for creating a sense of community and home.

HOW DO WE PAY FOR ALL THIS? If you want to make a youth group special, it's going to cost a bit more. Believe me, most parents will be thrilled to kick in some money to create this kind of place for their teens. Many parishioners will see it as important outreach spending. For funding special events, the youth themselves will have ideas: car washes, bake sales and auctioning themselves off to parishioners for a day to do yard work, baby-sitting or to help at a party are all usually extremely successful fundraisers.

USE THE INTERNET SPARINGLY: Use the internet—but sparingly: Sometimes things can be said one-to-one in an email which would not be said in any other medium. And young people will often respond to an email more quickly than to a phone call. On the other hand, it can become all too easy to replace personal interaction with virtual interaction. It is worth

Not in addition to “the spiritual stuff” but as part of it. Because every part of their lives *is* the spiritual stuff. Every part of their lives is interconnected with their search for and relationship with God.

In our youth gatherings, it is vital that we provide an atmosphere in which doubts can be voiced, difficulties can be wrestled with and questions can be lived in. Rote answers and formula theology don't do much to equip us for the deeply theological questions we all will face throughout our lives. *Why can't I get my locker open?* and *Why doesn't God help me pass my French exam?* all too soon become *Why is there so much suffering in the world?* *Why am I so lonely?* *Why did my parents get divorced?* *Why was I raped by the friend I trusted?* and *Why did my friend commit suicide?*

If Jesus' mission in this world, through the Holy Spirit, really is to transform the whole of our lives, then every part—the good, the bad and the broken—are fair ground for talking about at youth group. If someone wasn't interested in God before, they may well change their mind when they realize how God through the Scriptures addresses head-on the questions and problems they face every day.

Practical Application:

CONFIDENTIALITY: It is a wonderful privilege to have young people share the details of their lives with you. Keeping confidentiality, both within the group, and after individual conversations, is essential. However, confidentiality only goes so far. If a youth makes the request “I want to tell you something but

kids, “Go ahead and live the life of the culture but try to be a little nicer, buy Christian products, recycle, help someone if you get the chance.”

When youth observe a Christian community, they should feel like they’ve just stepped onto a different planet. When they see a community who genuinely seek to live with the radical courage, conviction and passion of Jesus, who refuse to buy into the illusion that life is “all about me,” who resist the seductions of the modern world and whose lives are characterized by a deep joy in one another and in God, it will intrigue them and draw them in. If we are trying to outdo the culture around us by playing the same game, we are on the wrong track entirely. But what a community of God’s people—genuinely living in relationship with Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit—can offer to our youth is comparable to a home-cooked meal set beside a Big Mac.¹⁹

- We can facilitate exciting and rich discussions that blow watching television right out of the water.
- We can invite youth to participate in authentic, vibrant friendship that makes anything they will experience in a chat room pale by comparison.
- We can counter the loud, self-centred message with which the culture bombards us with the gentle, quiet and consistent message of the intrinsic value and belovedness of each person.
- We can offer a place of belonging, no matter who people are, what they wear, what music they listen to or what sport they play.

DON'T JUST TALK ABOUT IT: Concretely respond to the issues that are on the minds of the youth: write letters to the government, volunteer in the soup kitchen or bring in a professional counselor to talk about issues such as depression, eating disorders or suicide. Sometimes Christian resource people will be available to talk with your youth. If not, don't be afraid to bring in other resource people, as long as they are at least respectful of Christian beliefs. You can ground the talk in a Christian framework afterwards. And you might be surprised at how well your youth can do this themselves.

Culture

Many youth workers find ways of using the pop culture around them as a point of contact with their teens. We get their attention with a clip from *The Lord of the Rings* or a song by Switchfoot and use it as a springboard into a Bible study or a theological or life discussion. While some people will argue that the church needs to be above the culture, Penner and Overholt urge us to have the same attitude toward youth ministry that Paul showed in Athens when he pointed the local people to the statue of the unknown God. Instead of alienating our youth by only decrying the culture, we can use it to help us convey our message. They write: “Our pop musicians are the poets of today, and Hollywood [or MTV, or MSN...] is a strategic pulpit addressing pressing social issues.”¹⁷ Indeed, using movies, songs, and clips from television shows for leading into or enhancing biblical and theological discussions can be extremely effective. There are many excellent resources for facilitating discussions involving popular culture and Christianity within the youth ministry canon. (See the Resources section for some ideas.)

But there is another side to the whole culture story. When being culturally relevant is an end in itself, and does not lead us into a relationship with Jesus, our attempts to teach the gospel through it are meaningless. And if we spend too much time flirting with the culture around us, we are in danger of being sucked into the deep sickness it embodies. The medium we use has a profound impact on the message we deliver, and when we

do choose to draw on popular culture to illustrate theological truth it must be done discerningly. Often the medium the culture offers us is shallow, exploitative, morally questionable and feeds negative stereotypes and low self-esteem. It fails to carry the weight of the Gospel message we are ultimately trying to communicate. The video game *Grand Theft Auto III*, popular with teenage boys, powerfully illustrates this point:

[It] invites kids to kill police, blow up their cars with a bazooka, then machine gun others and hear them scream. In this virtual reality, kids can go on to pick up a pair of prostitutes, spend time with them in a car, and then kick and beat them to the sidewalk—all these actions earning the player extra points.¹⁸

As Christians, we can and must do better. We do not always need to reject the culture around us, but we must think prayerfully, discerningly and critically about human creativity expressed in the culture around us, and in turn, teach our young people to do the same.

Our youth are searching for a spiritual reality that the gods of this age—sex, MSN, reality TV, material possessions, the coolest websites, the right logos on our cars, t-shirts and running shoes—fail to satisfy. And one of the most serious problems facing the church today is that often *it* fails to satisfy, too! Overholt and Penner give this harsh indictment:

Christianity just seems to be a more beige, milk-toast form of consumer living. We preach that Jesus calls us to new life, but young people quickly perceive that the Christianity that’s being preached is a kind of “Capitalism-lite.” We tell

you have to promise not to tell anyone,” you must not make that promise. Offer the youth complete confidentiality unless you believe that in keeping a confidence you will put them at risk of hurting themselves, hurting others, or being hurt. If a young person is in serious danger in any way, you are obligated by law to report it. You may need to say something like: “I’m sorry but I can’t *promise* not to repeat what you tell me, because, depending what it is, sometimes the law requires me to tell someone in authority.”

COUNSELING: A youth leader is *not* a counselor. Unless you are trained as a counselor, do not pretend to be one. During youth meetings and at one-on-one events, youth may share difficult problems they are struggling with. Listen and offer appropriate guidance. But realize that some issues your young people will be facing will require the help of a trained professional. Encourage them in that direction and refer them on.

PARENTS: Youth leaders are not replacement parents. Wherever possible, they work alongside parents, supporting them and supplementing what they are teaching and modeling in their homes. Develop good relationships with parents and offer support to complement the love and support youth are already getting from their families.

INTERVENTION: If a young person is in a home, school or other situation where they are at risk of violence or other abuse, you are legally and morally obligated to seek outside help. Observe the situation closely. In other situations of difficulty, you may still find yourself in the vital role of an advocate.

- We can welcome them into a community characterized by the joy (and authentic struggles) of people who refuse to be dulled, bored and desensitized by the mind-numbing culture around them and who genuinely strive to live the Christian life.
- We can provide places where they can step out of the rat race and seek God in the stillness. One of the most stunning new resources for youth ministry is *Soul Shaper* by Tony Jones. In it Jones explores ancient spirituality and contemplative practices and suggests we apply them both to our youth ministry and to our own lives. For the kids I work with, what’s old is new: *lectio divina* and Benedictine and Ignatian spirituality are all pretty cutting-edge. They love it that Christianity offers us a lot of ancient stuff that’s about searching and exploring the divine.
- We can offer them high risk challenges that teens are so naturally wired for through activities such as white water canoeing, rock climbing and sailing: risks that don’t end with AIDS, pregnancy or a drug overdose.

Our teenagers are longing for more than the culture has to offer. What they need are not leaders who are up on all the latest electronic gadgets, movies and music, but adult figures who are genuinely interested in them: in their decisions about university, their gifts and self-image and even in the girl or boy they are afraid to ask out.

We cannot change the culture around us overnight, but one youth at a time, we can invite them out of the rat race around us into life-giving relationships that truly transform their lives.

The Whole Person

Teen bodies are perceptibly changing, sometimes overnight. Hormones explode and first love, first jobs and first kiss all happen in a blur. Pressure to perform at school, on teams and in families escalates. Penner and Overholt write:

If you gave each change a stress number, many teens would be off the chart. In fact, stress levels related to ‘so many things changing’ is higher for youth than any generation of adults today.¹⁴

It is no wonder that this is also a time of real struggles and pain. Part of our role in youth ministry is to walk with our youth in their struggles, supporting them in the best way we can. And many need a lot of support.

Statistics point to the sobering reality that all is not well for certain youth. Nationally, alarming numbers of youth suffer depression, have a serious drug or alcohol problem, have attempted suicide, have experienced physical and sexual abuse and have suffered from gang violence.¹⁵ By age 14, one in four teens has had sexual intercourse and by age 16, one in two.¹⁶ Teens have a lot on their minds: social issues, school safety, the frantic pace of life, the pressure to perform. Self-mutilation, suicide, sex, depression, family relationships, boyfriends or girlfriends (or the lack thereof), plans for the future, jobs, eating disorders, depression, exams, bullying and virtually everything else are not only appropriate to talk about at a Christian youth group, but they are things we *should* be talking about.

remembering that handwritten notes still speak volumes, and that a real voice (even on the phone) with its personal warmth and varied intonation, strengthens relationships in a way that less personal media cannot.

university libraries, and the Holy Spirit is transforming lives at climbing gyms, on camping trips and on city busses. If we really believe God is serious about the Incarnation, this just may be the way He works. He has a way of getting tangled up in every part of our lives.

Practical Application

KEEP IT PERSONAL: Keep track of the birthdays in your group. We keep a bag of inexpensive dollar store gifts hidden away so we never miss a birthday, even if we didn't know about it in advance. Acknowledge significant landmarks with a card (graduation... birthday... congratulations on your piano exam... sorry you're having such a bad week...)

BE FULLY PRESENT TO YOUR YOUTH: Don't look at your watch or have another meeting set for 30 minutes after you sit down for a heart to heart with a teen. Allow time and space for the unexpected.

FREE UP YOUR YOUTH WORKER: If she or he is spending every minute writing reports and attending meetings, there won't be much time for the very deliberate ministry of "hanging out."

PAY THE COFFEE BILL: Seriously: if your youth leader and volunteers are in earnest about incarnational ministry, the church should make it a high priority to support this financially. Receipts submitted for reimbursement from unconventional places (within reason, of course!) probably indicate that your youth leader is right out there on the front lines.

we take them together, as a "package deal." Neither our ministry nor our Christian lives are complete unless we are living out all of these things: a love of the Father and the earth he has created (together with the Spirit and the Son); a relationship with the Son and a hunger for his teaching; an intimacy with the Spirit who sanctifies us from the inside out. Worship. Prayer. Social Justice. Healing. Advocacy for the poor. Confession. Forgiveness. Reconciliation with God. Community. Church. World. Culture. Bible. Death. Life. Sexuality. Service. Joy. Law. Grace. All the stuff of the Christian story has a place in our youth ministry. At its best, youth ministry encompasses the whole of the Christian Life.

But a theology of the Trinity is far more than a reminder to be sure to include characteristics of the Father, Son and Spirit in our program and in our teaching. The eternal, interactive relationship within the Trinity tells us that there is a dynamic, life-giving community at the centre of who God is. Precisely *because* we are created in God's image, we can be confident that we too were designed to be in community with God *and* with others. Trinitarian theology teaches us that community and relationships are as vital to the life of our souls as blood is to physical life.

In each of us there is a deep desire not only to know others, but to truly be known. But in the culture around us, really opening ourselves up to the vulnerability of being known is a risky business. We might get laughed at. We might get lied to. We might get hurt or betrayed. Because the culture around us has sold out. It poisons us with a cynicism, rampant individualism and images of lust and romance that have little to do

number of times I have been told it was a conversation over a one-dollar cup of hot chocolate that I don't even remember has left me humbled. In my own life, this has been vividly true. No sermon, no book, no lecture at seminary has ever impacted me in the same life-transforming way as relationships with the people who have helped me to see God at work in my own story, complete with all the questions, confusions, struggles and joys. James Penner and David Overholt are co-authors of a recent, outstanding Canadian book on youth ministry, *Soul Searching the Millennial Generation*. In it they write: "Taking the time for informal relationships is key. Long-term, non-judgmental relationships of unshockable friendship with youth are a must."⁹ God is in the business of relationships and that means we need to be, too.

This emphasis on relationships does not mean we get rid of our programs or give up on large groups. In fact, you can set up great programs that facilitate deep relationships. It is only when they become an end in themselves that we are moving in the wrong direction. As Penner and Overholt are quick to point out, when we look at the model of Jesus, we see that he did very little one-on-one ministry. "He took his twelve, or at least his three, with him. He even went in for big events, such as the feeding of the five thousand."¹⁰

Youth ministry requires relationships on many different levels—one-on-one, one-on-two-or-three-or-four, large groups, small groups and middle sized groups. Whatever the configuration, incarnating the gospel naturally and authentically in all relationships remains the priority.

transformed: competitiveness is replaced by a recognition and celebration of distinct gifts, and serving one another out of love and respect becomes the norm.

The practical implications of Trinitarian theology for youth ministry cannot be underestimated. We need to get past trying to solve the problem of the Trinity with Sunday School lessons on eggs and three leaf-clovers, and begin to see it as a relationship to be entered into and enjoyed. Each of us—as individuals *and* collectively—are called to enter into community with this extravagant, wildly loving God: community that turns legalism and guilt into freedom, that transforms boredom and apathy into enthusiasm for life, and that transforms our insecurities into the confidence that we are loved and beloved. There are no technologies, drugs, material goods or sexual experiences that will ultimately meet the deepest longings in our hearts. But there is a *relationship* that will.

Practical Application:

COMMUNITY BUILDING: A sense of community may form naturally by just getting together. But there is nothing wrong with encouraging it a bit, and some groups really do need help in developing a sense of community, trust and safety so that genuine conversations and growth can occur. Group-building activities, trust exercises, initiative games, the challenge of rock climbing, ropes courses, camping trips, etc. can all be extremely helpful. Great resources are available to help. (See the Resources section at the back.)

Encouraging male role models can make a huge difference in the lives of young men as they navigate their way through puberty into becoming young adults.

PROTECT YOURSELF, PROTECT YOUR YOUTH: Without exception, a youth group needs a minimum of one main leader and one assistant. All leaders working with young people *must* have a current police check. Never meet one-on-one unless in a public space. Be sure that whatever space you meet in is well lighted, has windows, is relatively public and has easy access to exits. Coffee shops, donut shops and walks in public places all are good options for conversations that are personal. It is better to have a healthy paranoia around boundaries than to risk having a teenager emotionally, physically or otherwise abused, or to have an innocent youth leader falsely accused of inappropriate behaviour.

Church

People are hungry for spirituality... they just don't expect to find the answers in church.

— John Griffiths

Youth ministry is inextricably connected with the church because the Christian life is inextricably connected with the church. Bibby's survey, however, reveals a sobering reality about churches: only about 20% of teenagers feel joyful when they think of faith communities. A third of the teenage population has no connection to a religious group, and another quarter is unimpressed with the impact religion is having on their lives.²²

We can't let the church off the hook. Many of the youth I know describe it as *long*, *boring*, or just plain *not my thing*. We live in a culture of extreme individualism, and we're not likely to do something if it's *not our thing*. Virtually everything can be made to order to suit our individual needs, from our houses to our coffee to our hamburgers. We are used to having so many choices we rarely have to fit in with the needs and preferences of others. And the church gets sucked into this all the time. We offer special services for people of all different musical, liturgical, theological and temporal preferences, and we work hard to separate the different generations, sometimes hiring a youth worker as a translator between generations because the cultural gap is just too wide. And when we do get together for the occasional intergenerational service, we hold our breath and cover our ears and breathe a sigh of relief

Youth leaders need to take responsibility for self-care, but churches need to help. One model that works well for me is to have an advisory group. It is made up of eight people who love God, love youth ministry and love me. Their job is to keep one finger on the pulse of the ministry and the other on the pulse of how I am doing. If the ministry is not going well, they gently let me know and help me discern a way forward. If I'm not doing well, sometimes I'm the last to know it. Then their job is to tell me to take a break, to drop some of my plans for the coming year so I don't burn out, or to ask when the last time was that I had a day of prayer.

As leaders, we are more than traveling companions to our teens, and if our goal is to be "just one of the youth" we are not effective leaders. We walk with our youth as fellow pilgrims who have traveled the same road a bit longer: not as someone to tell them where they should be going, but as one who helps them see God doing things in their lives that their own eyes might miss. We don't challenge them to become more like us, but to become more fully who *they* are in Christ. As we walk with our youth, it is both our privilege *and* our responsibility to share whatever wisdom we have learned on our own journey thus far. We must make mentoring and discipleship high priorities. We must also remember that ultimately, our goal is far bigger than connecting the youth in a relationship with the youth worker or other Christian peers. Our deepest hope for them must be to invite them into a meaningful relationship with God himself.

wineskins offered to us by the culture, but to explore new wineskins that we in the church are only starting to dream of. And these are the questions the church in the 21st century needs to commit itself to explore creatively.

Separating our communities based on personal preference and age may mean we don't fight as much about the music, but the trade off is that we miss out on one of the richest gifts the church has to offer: a genuine, intergenerational community. Because the church just may be one of the last truly intergenerational communities going. Where else can elderly grandparents whose own grandchildren are scattered across the globe rock babies every week? Where else can single people be invited into families? Where can children run around with teenagers (whom they usually revere) and teenagers receive mentoring from Christian adults who are not their parents? Such is the body of Christ as found in the church.

The real question for us to ask is not *How do we integrate youth into our churches?* but *How can we encourage the whole, intergenerational community to thrive?* How do all of us embrace one another in all our quirkiness and with all our differences for the deeper goal of finding our unity in Christ?

Church goes far beyond talking about styles of worship and negotiating between pipe organs and drums. And the time to start thinking about integrating our youth fully into the life and mission of the church is not when they hit puberty. It begins by supporting them from the time they are baptized and before! It involves nurturing our children in the faith and doing "all in our power to support them in their life in Christ."

with God and teach them to share their faith with others. They have more access to other teens in the local high school than most of us ever will. Help them grow in confidence and empower them to stand up for other youth who are being bullied or marginalized. Teach them about active listening, conflict resolution and introduce other skills that might really make a difference in helping their peers.

SPACE: Don't banish youth to a musty room in the basement. It doesn't need to be glamorous, but make every effort to find the youth a clean, windowed room of their own that they can furnish with donated couches and chairs and make as zany as they like. Help them make it a safe, comfortable and creative place into which they will feel good inviting their friends.

them up and invite them to services anyway. They never ask "what'll the music be like" and they could care less who will be preaching. The one thing more than anything else that gets them to church is that they want to say hi to Clarence, or to some other caring adult who has taken the time to get to know them well. And so they stay connected, and the relationships that connect them to the community are deep enough to carry them—by the grace of God—through their crazy teenage years.

Practical Application

CONNECT: Constantly look for places to make intergenerational connections within the church community. Connect babysitting teens with frazzled young moms, connect math teachers with struggling high school students, connect babies with grannies. Connect. Connect. Connect. And eventually, these connectings will become second nature to the parish and will happen on their own.

INTEGRATE: Integrate youth fully into the life of the church. Encourage teenagers to join various groups in the church. (Have adults extend a personal invitation to the youth to join the choir, the worship committee, the parish council, etc.) Integrate anywhere and everywhere—to sing, greet, teach, read, preach, dramatize Bible readings, play an instrument, bless and pray—not as a token "youth representative" but as a gifted member of God's family.

drugs or weapons. We see a group of young women in short halter tops and lipstick and worry about their sexual activity.⁵

And so we hire a youth worker to “do something with the youth” and then send them off to the church basement with a sigh of relief.

If Howe and Strauss are right, we have less to worry about in the area of drug use and promiscuity among young people than we have in 20 years. In a 2000 interview, Strauss claims: “Never before has there been a generation that is less violent, less vulgar, less sexually charged than the culture being offered them.”⁶ Still, the negative stereotypes remain. Recently at my gym, I overheard two women on a long rant about the generic teenagers who were loud, obnoxious, and generally frowned upon. Eventually though, the conversation shifted to a specific teen whom the women obviously both knew. Now their whole tone shifted. This was no longer a group of rebels but a specific individual with unique gifts that each of them could value and admire. This conversation illustrates a deep truth: until we get to know teenagers as unique and gifted people, created to reflect the image of God, we will never get past the media bias and fully embrace the great gift they are to our churches and to our lives.

When we take the time to get to know our youth, we begin to see their extraordinary vision and energy not as problems to be dealt with, but as gifts for which we give thanks. We are challenged by their endless questions and encouraged to grow in our own journeys toward knowing God. And we are

A Vision for the Future

We can't do everything at once. In fact, we can't do everything. It is better to do a few small things genuinely and well than to try to build a large youth ministry that has its foundation on the sand. We begin one relationship at a time as we build on a foundation of prayer and of God's unconditional love.

As youth leaders, how do we bring our youth to faith in Christ? The answer is: We don't. Ultimately, it is God who will transform the lives of our young people—not our clever lessons, our cultural “with-it-ness” or our well-funded youth groups. This is God's work, not ours. And this same God has been intimately involved in their lives from the time he knit each teen together in their mother's womb and breathed life into them. This is the same God who loves them and has pursued them—pursues them still—with more passion, more love, and more persistence than we could ever possess. Youth ministry is not about what we can do in the life of a teenager. It is about walking with young people on their own unique journeys as they get to know Jesus. It is about watching, listening and discerning the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of our young people and then joining in—or getting out of the way.

The reason I am committed to youth ministry today is this: while I was a disenchanted 19-year-old university student, I stumbled into a Christian community who answered my questions not with doctrine or Bible quotes but with home-cooked meals and long conversations, with lots of room to feel

scriptures creatively, bringing with them all their genuine questions, doubts and struggles, they might not get what we have planned out of the Bible study, but they just may meet God in deeper, more life-transforming ways than we have planned or imagined.

SPACE: Leave space for the spontaneous working of the Holy Spirit. Don't fill in every space with your own agenda.

Imagine how this would transform the church.

Imagine how this would transform our world.

Imagine what might happen if we really believed in God's power to transform young people's lives and committed ourselves to support it with everything we've got.²⁴

youth ministry” that will get our teenagers through these tumultuous years. This is not such a booklet. And if you ever do find such a book, approach it with caution, because there is no guaranteed formula for successful youth ministry any more than there is a surefire formula for living the Christian life.

We seek God in the Scriptures, and as the Spirit leads us, we stumble upon ideas that sometimes seem to “work.” But youth ministry is not a program to be followed. It encompasses many levels of relationships to be entered into, nurtured and enjoyed. We do not step out on our own. We wait; we watch; and we listen until we discern what God—Father, Son and Spirit¹—is already doing. And then we enter in, participating in the grand narrative of salvation God has been writing long before we came into the story and will continue to write long after our part has come and gone. This is God’s work—not ours. Our Triune God is “pulling us into a far larger world than we can imagine on our own.”²

Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices In Youth Ministry*. El Cajon CA: Youth Specialties, 2003. “A book that makes faith come alive in practice, that makes the past come alive in the present and offers these gifts only if you’re willing to spend significant time learning about the church’s powerful, active spiritual heritage (and your place in it).” This book is stunning and may well revolutionize both youth ministry and youth ministers in the way we approach God.

David Overholt and James Penner, *Soul Searching the Millennial Generation: Strategies for Youth Workers*. Toronto: Stoddart, 2002. If you are new (or old) at youth ministry, this is a fabulous book to read to get your bearings. Overholt and Penner definitely understand and love teens, they have some great ideas about how to approach youth ministry, and they ground us in some important theological foundations. If I had to recommend just one book to youth workers who are either new at it or who feel the need to reset their compass, this would probably be it.

Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. This is Peterson at his best. He grounds both spirituality and theology in a Trinitarian understanding of God that is rich and relevant. This is foundational reading for anyone in ministry and anyone seeking to live an integrated Christian life.

PRACTICAL RESOURCES

Les Christie, *What If...?* and Doug Fields, *Have You Ever...?*, both by Youth Specialties. These are two small books with nearly 1000 questions between them that you can use at youth group to get kids talking.

The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC): www.licc.org.uk. The youth link on this website has articles and discussions that are outstanding and relevant. Well worth a regular look. The rest of the site is brilliant as well.

The Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry: www.ptsem.edu/iym. This website posts annual lectures on Youth, Church and Culture as well as various conferences and resources for youth ministry. These lectures are outstanding and well worth reading.

Dare: www.individual.utoronto.ca/johnbowen/dare. On this website you'll find a number of booklets on current issues such as *The Lord of the Rings*, U2, the question of suffering, and introductory material on Christian spirituality. They are well worth ordering and adapting for your group.

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Notes

1. I am comfortable myself with the traditional language of “Father, Son and Spirit,” though I realize it is controversial for some.
2. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 46.
3. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 4.
4. Howe and Strauss, 7.
5. Mark Yaconelli, “A Bridge Demands a Life.” The 2003 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture, “Building Bridges,” 76. (Found at: Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry Website.)
6. William Strauss, interviewed by Mary McNamara in “If You Can’t Join ‘Em, Boss ‘Em Around... and Imitate Them...” *The Los Angeles Times* (25 Sept, 2000), cited in Yaconelli, 76.
7. Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Spiritual Practices in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 30-31. Of course, these pitfalls await everyone in Christian ministry, ordained or lay, not just youth workers.
8. Susan Norman, “Nurturing Children in Faith,” *InCourage*, August 2005.
9. James Penner and David Overholt, *Soul Searching the Millennial Generation* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2002), 14.
10. Penner and Overholt, 157.
11. This thought is expounded in important ways in Norman’s article and in her Master’s Thesis, *Jesus as Teacher*, UBC, 2004 (unpublished).