

Revitalizing Ministry with Youth and Young Adults

“There is a new, national conversation about youth and youth ministries,” says the Rev. Dietrich “Deech” Kirk, co-founder and executive director of the Center for Youth Ministry Training in Brentwood, Tenn. “Youth ministry is not just about fun and games.”

Kirk’s words mark an important shift in youth ministry today. With the aid of careful research, religious leaders are attending more closely to spiritual hungers of young people, and many churches are reimagining their ministries for youth and young adults. During the last 15 years, Lilly Endowment has awarded a series of strategic grants to help pastors and church leaders assess and enhance their ministries for young people. Totaling more than \$108 million, these grants responded to con-

The Endowment’s grants support efforts to mobilize the talents of thoughtful scholars and creative pastors to examine the religious lives of youth today and to test new approaches for the Christian formation of young people. Strategically, they seek to advance interrelated endeavors: (1) studies of the lives of youth and young adults to understand more deeply their religious questions and spiritual hungers; (2) examinations of exemplary youth ministries to uncover and describe what works and



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cerns expressed by religious leaders, who noted a growing number of youth who drop out of their churches. These leaders were alarmed about the apparent inability of their congregations to hold onto their youth, and they feared that they were slowly losing a generation of Christian young people.

More important, they recognized that the predominant models for youth ministry – those that often emphasized entertainment-based ministries and depended on the leadership skills of a dynamic youth pastor – just weren’t working anymore.

New approaches were needed to pass the faith to the next generation.

why; (3) experimental projects to develop new models for youth ministries, and (4) leadership development programs to prepare pastors and youth workers more fully for ministries with young people.

Although these efforts are far from complete, the early results are encouraging. “Lilly Endowment has been the engine that started this formal conversation about faith formation,” says Kenda Creasy Dean, associate professor of youth, church and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary.



involving 3,370 telephone surveys and 267 in-depth individual interviews. By mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods, the NSYR paints the first complete big-picture description of American youth and religion and also provides nuanced information about the diverse religious experiences and social and economic circumstances of young people.

Building on the initial success, the researchers contacted the same young

The big picture

It dawned on him early in his career, notes Christian Smith, professor of sociology and director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, that too little was known about young people and their religious beliefs, attitudes, influences and practices. Much less was known about the causal effects of religion that shaped the lives of youth and young adults over time. “As a subject, it had just slipped through the cracks,” he says. “Until the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), there really hadn’t been adequate national data to support any assumptions about youth. In that way, the project has been very helpful.”

Since 2001 Smith has directed the NSYR, an Endowment-supported, landmark sociological study of the religious lives of American adolescents and young adults that has challenged many long-held assumptions about youth and shed fresh light on their religious beliefs and practices.

The NSYR research team designed a study that began with an extensive survey of a nationally representative group of adolescents and their parents,

people and conducted a second round of surveys and in-depth interviews with them when they reached late adolescence as 16- to 21-year-olds. The surveys and interviews were repeated a third time when they reached young adulthood as 18- to 23-year-olds. The fourth and final wave, now under way, follows the same group as they reach adulthood as 25- to 29-year-olds and begin careers and families of their own. The result is an unprecedented longitudinal database that tracks the religious longings and growth of young adults over time.

The NSYR’s findings have surprised many church leaders. American teenagers generally do not have negative views of religion; in fact, they have an openness and curiosity about religion. They also tend to reflect the religious beliefs and traditions of their parents and are not particularly interested in rebelling or seeking alternate religious paths.

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Christian Smith, sociology professor at Notre Dame, has directed the landmark National Study of Youth and Religion for nine years. He and his team are heading into its final phase.

says. “That contradicts the main cultural script we’ve heard for years – that young people are rebellious and that there’s a generation gap that automatically disconnects adults and teenagers. It took a real readjustment in our thinking to realize how much teenagers need mature adults in their lives and how much they want them in their lives.”

The NSYR’s findings from the first and second waves of research have been published in well-received books. First came *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Smith and co-author Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005). The second wave of research resulted in *A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America’s Adolescents*, co-authored by Denton and Lisa Pearce (2011). The third wave was reported in an earlier book, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* by Smith and co-author Patricia Snell (2009).

(this page and next) **Teens have attended !Explore**, a summer youth theology program at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind., since 2004. Recent alums – Cara Paden and Kate Friesen attended in 2010 – and friends stopped in to visit with longtime director Andrew Brubacher Kaethler (in red shirt). Jessica Shrock-Ringenberg (in dark sweater) and Friesen watch Paden “practice preach.” Mandy Yoder, associate pastor at Belmont Mennonite Church in Elkhart, offers Paden a few homiletic hints. Paden is a senior at Concord High School in Elkhart, and Friesen is now a senior at nearby Goshen College; Shrock-Ringenberg, former youth pastor in Michigan, is now a full-time AMBS student.

their ministries with youth and young adults.

“The NSYR named something,” says Dean. “It gave words to something we as pastors and educators had observed.” One example, she says, is identifying the predominant religious attitude today among the majority of American youth. This attitude, which Smith in the NSYR describes as moralistic therapeutic deism, has five tenets: God exists; God wants people to be nice and fair to each other; the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good; God is distant and only involved in one’s life when a problem arises, and



From big picture to actual practice

The reach of the NSYR can hardly be overstated, according to Princeton’s Dean, author of the 2010 book *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, a product of her reflection as a member of the NSYR research team. Without the NSYR, churches would still be just guessing at what youth need to develop a mature Christian faith. Dean and a growing number of pastors, church leaders and religious educators are using key findings from the NSYR to rethink and redesign

finally, good people go to heaven when they die.

This version of Christianity, Dean argues, places few demands on individuals and is a diluted version of Christian faith that seems more comfortable for youth as well as for their parents. It’s not an entirely new problem. Dean quotes Methodism founder John Wesley, who noted in 1741 that the “church is full of almost Christians who have not gone all the way with Christ.”

Churches are both the problem and solution, Dean says. Churches can simply reinforce in young

people a watered-down version of Christianity, or they can challenge them to live out the gospel by teaching them Christian practices and cultivating in them a strong sense of mission – a seriousness of purpose that the NSYR also tells us youth are often eager to embrace, Dean explains.

Sticky Faith

Another perplexing question for pastors and parents is what happens to high school students when they graduate and move away to college. Do most young people find new faith communities to join, or do they – as church leaders fear – drift away from their churches and lose touch with their faith traditions? The Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., launched the College Transition

and lasting. We need to know: What can we do, as parents and church leaders, to give them a ‘sticky faith’?” Powell says.

Rebranded the Sticky Faith Project, Powell and the research team discovered three key factors that provide a foundation for a lasting faith: (1) youth develop relationships with adults in their home congregations; (2) young people pray with their parents and talk with them about their faith, and (3) youth are involved in mission and service projects that help teach them how to live out their faith.



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Project in 2006 to answer this question.

Directed by Kara Powell, assistant professor of youth and family ministry and executive director of the institute, the project has studied graduates from more than 500 youth groups during their first three years in college in hopes of discovering the characteristics of youth groups that are associated with a healthy transition to college life and to help youth workers develop those qualities in their youth groups.

Other studies revealed that approximately 40 percent of youth-group graduates drift from faith communities during their freshman year in college. “That’s when we realized that there is a problem and that we needed to figure out – before kids go to college – how to help them have a faith that is robust

Powell and her colleagues have presented their findings to nearly 10,000 church leaders at conferences around the country, rolled out Sticky Faith resources and curricula, and launched a blog and monthly e-journal to help connect young people with youth pastors and churches.

Identifying what works

The Exemplary Youth Ministry (EYM) Study is another national study looking at religious beliefs and practices of adolescents, but it is focused on congregations. The study asks: Are there any congregations with a high percentage of committed Christian youth? If so, what are they doing to establish faith as a vital factor in the lives of their youth? What accounts for

their effective approaches to ministry? Seven denominations were involved in the study.

Through extensive surveys of youth, parents, adult youth ministry leaders and church staff in 131 congregations, as well as on-site, in-depth interviews in 21 congregations, the study uncovered the characteristics of effective congregational youth ministries, according to Roland D. Martinson, the study's director and academic dean of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn.

"What we noticed was that in a society where the church is losing traction and losing the ability to engage a younger generation, some congregations are deeply engaging young people and bucking that trend," Martinson says.

Regardless of size, geographical location or denominational variations, the most effective congregations all share a "culture of the spirit," he says.

"It is the spirit of the living God, present among them. It is a vital, living expression that is lived out in leadership and in the community of faith that has the most powerful, pervasive influence on young people," Martinson says. "It is

the wholeness of the relationships, values and beliefs of the entire faith community that create the impactful environment that forms the life and faith of 12- to 18-year-olds."

These congregations also share other characteristics. Effective congregations have ministries that are thoroughly intergenerational. Young people are expected to participate and lead in church-wide ministries, including worship, education, fellowship and decision-making. Age-level ministries are marked by trusted relationships and activities that are intentionally planned to build an atmosphere of belonging. The effective congregations also educate parents in the faith and – no surprise –

count competent, faith-filled leadership as an important asset.

A lifelong youth minister, Martinson was particularly touched by the comment of one 17-year-old who told him that despite her nice family and good school, it was her church that "messes with my life." Asked what she meant, she told Martinson that her church family encouraged her to think deeply about her faith and to live out her values in her choices about her future career and lifestyle; church members also saw her strengths and recognized her capabilities in ways that others did not.

In a congregation with a strong, intentional youth ministry, lives are transformed. "Youth can be so profoundly affected," Martinson says.

Through the study's published findings in a 2010 book, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, by Martinson and co-authors Wes Black and John

(this page and next) **Notre Dame's Smith and his student** colleagues take breaks from studying sociological statistics. Enjoying the fresh air are (left to right), junior Hilary Davidson, Smith, and sophomores Justin Farrell and Daniel Escher.



Roberto, and an online presence, Martinson hopes that EYM will help reshape the way seminaries prepare pastors to serve congregations so that they will cultivate a culture in which young people can grow in faith and truly thrive.

Creative experiments

While these studies have provided important insights

into the religious lives of young people, the Endowment also has supported multiple experimental projects to develop new models for the Christian formation of youth. The most notable are the youth theology projects developed in the Theological Programs for High School Youth initiative.

Launched in 1998, this initiative provided grants to 48 theological schools to create intensive programs to engage youth in biblical and theological study and to encourage them to explore the possibility of entering the Christian ministry. Most of these programs revolve around residential summer institutes on college or seminary campuses, and the



youth participants engage in a rich combination of theological study, mission service experiences, daily worship, community building and leadership development activities.

All these programs have involved more than 13,000 young people in intensive summer institutes and touched the lives of more than 100,000 youth through conferences and workshops. Youth theology programs continue at 31 seminaries today.

Preparing a new generation of youth pastors

Connecting the research to practice is a continuing focus of the Center for Youth Ministry, which Dietrich Kirk co-founded with the Rev. Mark DeVries in 2005 to help new youth pastors with some of the same struggles Kirk experienced when he answered the call to ministry. “We (youth ministers) were low on the totem pole,” Kirk says. “Many of us thought that churches had it backwards by not devoting more resources to youth.”

With their local churches and a handful of seminaries, Kirk and DeVries launched a residency and degree program in youth ministry to provide youth pastors with the theological background and practical skills needed to build up and sustain vibrant ministries for young people.

The Endowment has supported the center with two grants. These helped the center create a think tank composed of researchers, project directors, theological educators and pastors to explore the theological and practical implications of the findings about youth that were emerging from research and experimental efforts. The grants also provided funds to help design practical resources for congregations and youth ministers and the means to distribute them through a Web site and print publications.

“It’s been a very fruitful time,” Kirk says. “There’s a greater collective spirit in youth ministry than ever before.”