

Youth ministries in black churches face many of the same issues

confronting Christian faith formation in all churches, but they also have some additional challenges. Funded by a grant in 2008 from Lilly Endowment, the Vision Quest Research Project of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta sought to learn more about youth ministry and its leadership in black congregations.

“Remarkable best practices are happening in small, medium and large black congregations, but there are also very discernible challenges,” says Anne Streaty Wimberly, professor emerita of Christian education and director of the Youth Hope-Builders at ITC. “The project was designed to discern the nature of excellence in youth ministry and youth ministry leadership.”

The study included telephone interviews with 833 predominantly black churches from the eight major denominations in the United States. Seminary students at five historically black seminaries conducted 247 surveys and several focus groups, and 31 churches were selected for in-depth interviews and observations of their youth ministry leaders and youth.

Findings revealed that most churches “recognize the importance of youth ministry and have a vision of excellence, but they struggle with minimal financial support, too little parental support, and a high turnover of youth pastors, who often work part-time and are stretched for time and other resources,” Wimberly says.

Also, black church youth ministries operate in a difficult context, she says. Many black communities have a higher percentage of people affected by educational and health concerns, low income, violent crime, and a disproportionate number of young men who are incarcerated, she notes. “Churches need to step up to the plate to provide guidance and support to youth ministries,” she says.

The study also identified “best practices” found across denominational and geographic lines. Among

them: black history celebrations that involve church elders; youth in leadership roles, from ushering to leading worship; mentoring programs; creative ministries such as a drumline ministry in a Brooklyn, N.Y., church; or youth ministry partnerships with other congregations and colleges and universities.

Wimberly, an advocate of black youth and ministry throughout her professional life as

an author and teacher, has seen the transformative power that inspirational, experiential programs can make in helping black

Christian youth “talk the talk and

walk the walk” of Christian living.

She directs the Youth Hope-Builders Academy, a summer residential program supported by an Endowment grant through the Theological Programs for High School Youth initiative, which encourages black high school youth to explore their faith and continue as leaders in the church and society. So far, 304 youth have graduated from the program. Many have returned to their congregations and neighborhoods as mentors to middle school students, and many more have found meaningful work in their communities during and after high school and college.

Nurturing youth is about claiming the role of youth as leaders for today and tomorrow – leaders in and beyond the church, she says.

“Historically, the black church has been and continues to be a pivotal institution and mediating structure in the black community,” Wimberly says. “But the critical task for black churches today is seeing, hearing, guiding and supporting black youth and finding places in the church for their active growth, learning and service.”

A Vision of Excellence



Anne Streaty Wimberly is professor emerita of Christian education at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. She has long directed her energies to the role of youth ministries in black churches.