

Re-GENertating Youth Ministry in Your Church

Fostering the Faith Factors: Practical Youth Ministry Insights

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Throughout my years of involvement with youth ministry, I have learned to hold in tension two fundamental characteristics of North American teenagers. On the one hand, the developmental need for autonomy and identity formation coupled with the rapid rise of technology and social media has created an adolescent culture seemingly more and more inward, or self, focused. (After countless attempts to get the teens to stop texting during youth lessons, I finally caved and passed around the “cell phone basket” into which we all deposited our electronics. It took a few weeks of doing this before the task could be accomplished without someone feigning apoplexy). On the other hand, however, studies such as the one done by Posterski, Penner and Tompkins (*What's Happening?: The State of youth Ministry in Canada*) are telling us that “youth today are more ready to get involved in service projects and compassionate ministry than in the past.” Most teens are tuned in to social justice issues and they desire to make a difference in the world.

Youth leaders, and those involved in mission and outreach, would do well to be aware of these two dynamics at play within today's youth. In light of this dualism, here are a few thoughts on youth in mission.

<sup>1</sup>Posterski, Don, Marv Penner and Chris Tompkins. *What's Happening?: The State of Youth Ministry in Canada*. (Muskoka Woods, 2009), 75.

## Understanding God's word as it relates to mission

We know that youth groups are not as important as we once thought they were. Without regular reflection and review, they can devolve into little more than centres for entertainment (a model which can't be sustained when you compare it to what's available in the surrounding culture for "fun"). Meaningful communities that uphold and exemplify consequential faith *are* the places where young people will find lasting and transformative spiritual life.

To that end, focusing on mission within youth ministry must be located first and foremost in scripture and in the work of the community of faith. Mission cannot be presented as simply another "activity" on the schedule. Discussing the covenant relationship between God and God's people, beginning as far back as Abraham (Genesis 12), reminds us - and our teens! - that God *is* mission, and that in the image of God we are called to be a people whose purpose it is to be a blessing to the nations around us. Without a strong foundation in the scriptures and a fortified understanding of our covenant relationship and responsibilities (with/to God and with/to the world), mission experiences can unfortunately become little more than another "trip" or "event," and any substantial long-term impact will be lost.

Doing the upfront, and ongoing, work of educating and theologically reflecting on the nature and purpose of mission welcomes adolescents to see mission as more than just an activity. They will begin to incorporate it into their sense of calling as followers of Christ; mission as the way of life. This helps them to break out of a culture that is "self" saturated, and also feeds their desire and passion for active religious practice in the world.

### Start small

A common mistake when it comes to getting teens involved in mission is we think we have to "GO BIG, OR GO HOME." We have to travel really far, or do a big project, or be part of a large group - believing that the "bigger" the mission experience, the more our young people's lives will be changed. Of course, many of us can reference "big" mission experiences that we



have been a part of, and perhaps they were transformative to some extent; however, I have found that *starting small* has had a more consistent and sustainable long-term impact.

Begin with something local that your teens care about (something environmental, or justice oriented; something to do with the marginalized, or those who are disabled), and create the opportunity for them to get involved. Start a community garden, offer hymn sing-alongs at the local retirement home, collect much needed items for the crisis pregnancy centre, or start a pick-up basketball group on Thursday afternoons in a low-income neighbourhood where there are a lot of kids. Gradually get teens involved in more local missions while raising awareness of (and connecting them to) global issues.

When I was working with the youth at St. Andrew's, Guelph, we started small: going door to door to pick up canned food and pop bottles for the food bank and Habitat for Humanity. This blossomed into an annual food drive and a delivery of several thousand cans of food every year to the food bank where we got to see firsthand the impact our donations made. Later that year, a number of the youth inquired about doing a 30 hour famine, and it occurred to me that a spark had

ignited within the group. It just so happened that the same day we were doing our famine, our congregation was scheduled to help serve dinner to those in our community who lived on the streets. So, halfway through our fast, we walked to the downtown building and prepared and served a meal to over a hundred people who relied on this essential service. Very suddenly and very tangibly the meaning behind their fast and their act of service were fused together. Throughout our debriefing and reflection time later that night, it became more and more clear that many of these young people experienced an encounter with Christ in and through their time of fasting and serving, *and* they were able to tie it to the number of “small” service projects they had been participating in all year leading up to this experience. This has remained one of the transformative moments in the faith journeys of these young people.

## Be intentional

If technology has done anything positive for our teens, it has given them the ability to sniff out inconsistencies and “fakes.” When we look at doing projects, we need to be intentional on how we involve our young people. Teens are quick to point out *fake* peripheral participation (of which we have all been guilty); in other words getting teens do those

“grunt” jobs the rest of us don’t feel like doing (but calling it “service to the church,” and even offering volunteer hours for high school students). Meanwhile we keep them *out* of actual experiences that cultivate leadership and deep spiritual practice (like regular involvement in planning teams and committees, putting together worship services, participating in prayer meetings, etc.). With our mouths we are saying that we want them to be a part of the life and mission of the church, but our practice sometimes suggests that we’d rather they stick to their “youth” activities until we need them for labour.

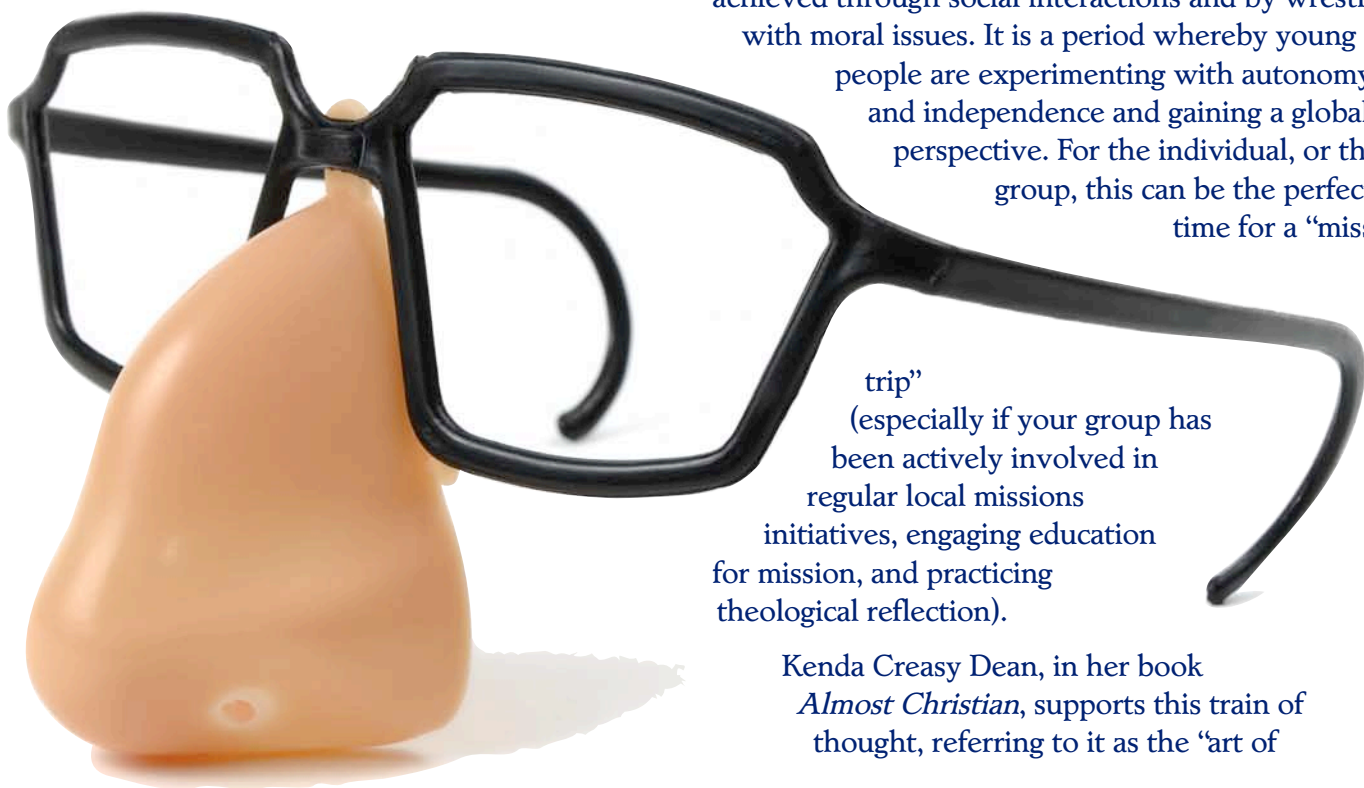
Being intentional means planning to involve young people in legitimate, meaningful and consequential acts of service and outreach. This is especially effective if it is done in an intergenerational setting. The church has *one* mission - the mission of God to the world in Christ, and we have *all* been called and equipped by the Spirit to participate in that ongoing mission - regardless of age. Any conversation the church has about mission ought to involve the full body of Christ, and that includes our young people.

## Mission trips

The adolescent stage of development, according to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, involves a complex and drawn out process of identity formation, achieved through social interactions and by wrestling with moral issues. It is a period whereby young people are experimenting with autonomy and independence and gaining a global perspective. For the individual, or the group, this can be the perfect time for a “mission

trip” (especially if your group has been actively involved in regular local missions initiatives, engaging education for mission, and practicing theological reflection).

Kenda Creasy Dean, in her book *Almost Christian*, supports this train of thought, referring to it as the “art of





detachment.” Dean explains that for a teen to truly grasp mission, they must fully detach themselves from their present reality by being taken to a place that is greatly different from what they are used to. By removing the comforts of home, the Holy Spirit can work in and through young people in a new, transformative way.

### Don't re-invent the wheel

Sometimes we place too much pressure on ourselves as leaders to come up with the *best* program or have the *greatest* ideas. Reality check! There are innumerable great resources out there, so don't

exhaust yourself trying to re-invent the wheel when it comes to mission. Take advantage of what already exists! The Presbyterian Church in Canada offers various programs, including Youth in Mission and the Canada Youth Conference. Our Book Room has books and activity guides to get you started with lots of local, national or international service ideas. You are never alone - just ask!

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