COMMUNITIES OF DISCIPLES

WHY THE KIND OF CHURCH WE ARE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

I have served as a youth director in a number of settings, and one conversation surfaces regularly. It is raised by staff, parents and dedicated volunteers alike and can be a sign of anxiety about the future of the church.

BY CHRISTY LANG

The conversation is about what gets youth involved in church and what keeps them involved. It often generates new program ideas. I have turned down ideas I thought were poorly designed (*Let's have a carnival and let the teenagers run it*); or unethical (*Parents should force their kids to come*); or at odds with the call of the gospel (*Let's pay kids 10 dollars for bringing friends*). Honestly, I've come up with some bad ideas myself.

But I have never altogether rejected the question about what keeps kids coming because it's an important one. For the sake of young people, for the sake of the church and for the sake of the world in need of gospel-formed people, figuring out what draws and keeps youth involved in church is a part of youth ministry. Often, however, we come up with pragmatic responses, acting without the theological reflection that can ground, guide and critique our action.

A lot of us don't do theological reflection consistently. We're busy; youth group is tonight, and we need a plan, not a doctrine. We are not sufficiently theologically trained, so who are we to "do theology"? Volunteers want direction, not a theology lesson.

But perhaps most powerfully, we do not reflect theologically because theological reflection calls us back to our roots, to our very identities and purposes before God. It can call into question our basic assumptions and challenge us to become something new. We don't do theological reflection because it can upend the status quo. It calls for deeper changes than we usually make, and change scares us.

Yet theological reflection has been the engine of every reformation of the church. Without it, we get groundless reactions to cultural trends, and we grasp at pragmatic straws rather than building wisely for the future. Theological reflection is the faithful work of every practitioner. I am convinced that as we think about what gets and keeps youth involved in the church, we need to reflect both practically and theologically about who we as the church are meant to be.

Two Studies Churches Should Pay Attention To

In the past six years, two studies on the religious lives of teenagers were published that asked practical questions about teenagers, their religious communities and what keeps them involved. Their findings give us good theological meat to chew on.

The first study was the now famous National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR), headed by Dr. Christian Smith, the findings of which were published in 2005 as *Soul Searching*.[1] The other study was conducted by Rev. Dr. Carol E. Lytch at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and published in 2004 as *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*.[2]

The NSYR provides a big picture of the religious lives of American teens. By contrast, Lytch's study seeks to understand what leads teens to be committed to their churches. Her research depended on firsthand experience with teens, youth workers and parents in three Louisville congregations whose retention rates were significantly higher than other churches. Along with the NSYR, Lytch's study should cause us to do some careful theological reflection about the kinds of places our churches are.

A World that Makes Church Weird

Lytch is a Presbyterian pastor who is deeply invested in the future of the church, so she discusses factors that pose challenges to faith formation. She cites four "macrosocietal factors" as potential obstacles to faith:

"… the heightened sense of personal autonomy, family attenuation, the segmentation and thinning out of the network of social relationships, and the pervasive commercialization of vocations and good in society."[3]

In other words, the old structures that ensured the passing on of faith are no longer viable, and religions that emphasize community stand at odds with the dominant picture of the autonomous consumer. For many teenagers today, being responsible to a larger moral or religious vision or being committed to a group for the long term are just plain weird things to do. These realities propose a challenge to youth ministries that seek to help members live out faith in a community of faith. They are realities that must be confronted on the ground of every youth ministry. But they must also be confronted theologically as the church considers its calling in an unstable, relationally thin world.

Belonging, Believing and Competence

Lytch discovers that youth who involve themselves in faith communities have plenty of opportunities to participate in their religious traditions. Additionally, she notes that congregations that make youth ministry a priority have more teens attending. This finding might be overwhelming to the already busy youth worker. Is the answer just to offer an endless buffet line of programs?

Drawing on developmental theory, Lytch notes that adolescents have particular needs for forging identities, adopting worldviews and developing skills for living in an adult world. Given those needs, she says, *particular kinds of opportunities* for church involvement are especially important. She writes, "When teens are attracted to churches, they are attracted because the churches engage them in intense states of self-transcendence uniting emotional and cognitive processes. Churches 'catch' them on three hooks: a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning, and opportunities to develop competence."[4]

Three key concepts here for youth are *belonging* (understanding themselves as accepted members of the community); *sense of meaning* (hearing faith articulated in relation to their lived experience and having opportunities to express faith); and *competence* (developing skills in church that relate to skills they need in the rest of life, so that church isn't something to leave behind in childhood).

Busy youth workers don't need to create busier calendars. Focusing on *belonging*, *believing* and *competence* enables youth workers to address the places where youth are most likely—and most longing—to connect to their communities of faith. As we do this, we must consider theologically what it means for church to be a place where belonging, believing and competence are done faithfully.

The Parental Role of Modeling and Connecting

Both Lytch and the NSYR found that teens often mirror their parents' religious expressions. While Smith suggests that parents simply continue to exert a direct influence on their children through adolescence, Lytch suggests that parents are important in the teenage years because they get their kids to church. Teens who have access to non-parental Christian mentors are more likely to grow in faith and remain committed to their churches even when their parents no longer make them go. We should ask ourselves: If it is the case that parents have powerful influence on their children through modeling and through connecting them to the church, what does that mean God is calling the church to be and do?

Mundane versus Magnificent Methods

A final area of agreement between the two studies has to do with the methods that ministries employ to attract students' involvement. Are these places where shiny, new toys are a part of the magnificent youth room? Do they all include rock bands, mission trips to Malaysia and live Twitter feeds during the youth talks delivered by hipper-than-the-kids speakers? No. Their methods are surprisingly mundane.

Lytch observes that continuity of leadership and personal qualities of leaders such as humility, vulnerability, warmth and willingness to go outside the job description are more important than "superficial" factors.[5] A simple, pragmatic response might lead youth workers to try to be more humble or warm. A theological response will ask the whole church to consider how it goes about inviting and sustaining teen involvement and why.

What Kind of Church?

What does all this mean for youth ministry? Lytch suggests practical ways that churches might respond to the needs and circumstances of young people, and many of her suggestions have already been tried with some success. The research also calls for a *practical theological* response, especially in the area of ecclesiology.

If a church understands itself as an organization whose job is to perpetuate traditional ideas, it is unlikely to build a sense of belonging to community—or belonging to the One who called that community into being. If a church sees itself only as a human service community, it is unlikely to foster a sense of believing in the transcendent God revealed in Jesus Christ, and it will not foster the kind of meaning-making that connects faithful community to the rest of life. Ecclesial identity makes a difference for young people.

What theological convictions about the nature of the church will lead local churches to call young people into belonging, believing and building competence?

One theological voice of the 20th century offers a starting point. Avery Cardinal Dulles's book *Models of the Church* presents major ways of imagining the church in 20th-century theology. In the original 1974 edition, Dulles presents the following five models:

- Church as Institution
- Church as Mystical Communion
- Church as Sacrament
- Church as Herald
- Church as Servant

He argues that these models express "the salient features of the Church of Christ as it exists in any time or place."[6] In his original work, he hints that the Communion model might serve as the basis for a systematic ecclesiology. Later, he suggests that the model of Community of Disciples, a variation on Mystical Communion, has potential to serve as a larger theological paradigm.[7]

In presenting his Community of Disciples model, Dulles explains, "Discipleship always depends upon a prior call or vocation from Christ, a demanding call that brings with it the grace needed for its own acceptance."[8] He traces such discipleship to Jesus' earthly ministry, since Jesus chose disciples.

Dulles describes the disciples as a "contrast society, symbolically representing the new and renewed Israel."[9] They were supposed to live in ways that made them stand out and that would point to God's vision for the world. Eventually, this "contrast society" included all who would follow the risen Christ, and Dulles says discipleship was meant to be a "demanding and heroic" task.[10]

Dulles outlines how the community of disciples is shaped by the living Christ through Word and Sacrament, writing, "All Christians…are bound to certain activities that pertain to discipleship, and first of all to worship."[11] He observes how discipleship affects formation, explaining that newcomers must find a "welcoming community with responsible leaders who are mature disciples, formed in the ways of the Lord."[12] Faith is formed in a "network of interpersonal relations," he says, relations that are part of what it means to be in a community.

In a remarkably contemporary-sounding comment, Dulles writes that "young people do not easily respond to the biblical and liturgical symbols" and that "the Christian family…is not always in a position to transmit [Christian] values to its younger members, who are heavily influenced by peer groups and by the mass media," which supports a culture "preponderantly based on the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, and power."

In response, and in conversation with Scripture, Dulles outlines how a community of disciples always includes educational, liturgical and missional impulses. The three impulses, he says, are necessary for the life of the church, and they must mutually reinforce one another.

Living Out Belonging, Meaning and Competence

These studies lead us to ask the question, *How is the church to connect these studies into the context of where they are right now?* Several ideas emerge:

Worship: where belonging is meant to happen
Lytch suggests that churches can be places where youth experience *belonging*. Dulles in turn calls the community to *worship*. Corporate worship is often the last place teens fit in. But worship is exactly the place where everyone belongs, where we are accepted by God and gathered together. In our praise, prayers, preaching and celebrations, we are called to make worship hospitable to the presence of all members, including teens. Churches that see themselves as communities of disciples cultivate a sense of belonging to God and one another, in worship and in all its activities.

Learning: where believing can happen
Lytch also says churches can be places where youth experience *believing*—that is, opportunities to hear their faith related to the rest of life. Dulles in turn calls the community of disciples to constantly *learn the faith*. Churches often fail to engage young people in talking about their faith in a serious way that also relates to the teen world, and they rarely train parents to talk to their kids. Dulles explains that a community of disciples ensures that its adult members become mature in the faith, which includes the parents of teens. Learning the faith is not supposed to stop after childhood, and adult maturity allows for young people to see models of maturity. The community of disciples supports its youth because it teaches the adults who teach teens.

Mission: where competence is called for
Lytch emphasizes competence—helping youth learn skills for living in a complex world. Dulles in turn calls the community of disciples to mission—to a demanding, heroic task of service in Christ's name. In mission, we are called to develop competencies for service, and such competencies support the emerging identities of teens who can see themselves as beloved and sent.

Church: where weirdness is next to godliness
Lytch talks about the world that makes church weird. Dulles talks about the church that revels in its weirdness, since it knows it is called by Christ to stand out. For teens raised on TV and consumerism, showing

up to worship a God they can't see but who asks that they serve and forgive others is either a profoundly countercultural action, or sheer madness. Without a community to present a compelling rationale for such bizarre behavior, many teens may never get past the weirdness. A church that is a community of disciples sees itself as a contrast society that embraces the label of weirdness and can explain why the weirdness is worth it. Such a church will help teens take a critical (sometimes appreciative) posture toward their culture and help them articulate their distinctive beliefs.

We've all wondered what keeps youth involved in Christian community. Lytch helps us see practical ways some churches hold on to youth. Dulles makes theological sense of her findings, since he connects them to the great callings of the church: worship, learning and mission.

If the church is to be faithful to its calling, then it must become what Christ has called it to be: a community of disciples, where the theological tasks of corporate worship, intergenerational learning and joint mission enable belonging, believing and competence.

1. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,* Oxford, 2005.
2. Carol Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens,* Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
3. Lytch, pp. 201-2.
4. Lytch, p. 25.
5. Lytch, pp. 23-24.
6. Avery Dulles. *Models of the Church,* Doubleday: New York, 2002, p. 196.
7. Dulles, p. 198.
8. Dulles, p. 217.
9. Dulles, p. 200.
10. Dulles, p. 203.
11. Dulles, p. 206.
12. Dulles, p. 209.

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