

Youth and Discipleship: Diagnosing the Problems

A great deal of energy in youth ministry is devoted to creating experiences that capture the attention or interest of young people, writes Greg Priebbenow, in this perspective from the USA.

To this end, there are perhaps more resources (printed curriculum, staff, multimedia resources) available than ever before. In the western world, however, the outcomes are disappointing. Most teenagers within the sphere of the church's influence have not developed an active, vibrant faith. They are, in the words of Kenda Creasy Dean, "almost Christian" in their beliefs and practices. They may be nice people, but not disciples of Jesus Christ.

So what is going wrong? There are of course many factors at play, but I believe the following are hugely significant (1) the lukewarm faith lives of many church parents; (2) a dearth of faith communities that "live into" the Christian faith through intentional practices and habits that reflect the heart of Christ and draw people into beyond-surface-level faith-based relationships with one another; and (3) the failure of the church in general to give young people "worthy adventures" which call and enable them to make a difference in the world in Christ's name with their unique gifts and passions.

Kenda Creasy Dean's latest book is titled [Almost Christian](#). An interview with her appears in the latest edition of the [Youthworker](#) magazine (July 2010). Much of what she says is worth a serious ponder. Kenda was asked "what is teenage faith telling the church?" This (in part) is her response:

Adults are living a lukewarm Christianity that young people are emulating. ... The faith that teens have looks very much like the faith of their parents. It's not shaking up their lives in any discernable way. Lots of kids say they're Christian, but almost none of them think it really matters.

In other words, faith does not matter to young people because they do not see that it matters to their parents. They are disciples of their parents, but not disciples of Jesus, for very often their parents are not. The faith immaturity of parents is reflected in the views and practices of their offspring. One way this manifests itself is in the "hands off" attitude many parents take to the faith formation of their children:

People don't want to coerce their kids into faith. Often parents say, "We want to expose our kids to religion. Then we're going to let them choose for themselves." That's naive. Teaching is not indoctrination or coercion. It's purposefully passing on something that matters. We talk about it, model it and construct opportunities to practice it. We don't just expose our children to things that matter. Can you imagine the disaster we'd have if we

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simply “exposed” teenagers to driving? We teach them to drive because driving well matters. Why are we more concerned about teaching teenagers to drive than to follow Christ.

Effective youth ministry is dependent then upon the effective faith formation of adults, and parents in particular.

Ministry with young people requires ministry with parents. Parents are the most important spiritual mentors in a teenager’s life, but few parents realize it or feel prepared for this role. Addressing teenager’s faith without simultaneously addressing parent’s faith is like trying to fill a bathtub without a plug.

Kenda also highlights the importance of the “socialisation” into the Christian faith that “occurs in communities that have strong boundaries“. Such congregations communicate to young people a strong sense of care and belonging and apprentice them into Christian life through relationships with adults who model to them a genuine and active faith.

Ideally, a youth program ... allows teens to create paths where youth and Christian adults can practice together being faithful to God and each other. ... Teens respond better to concrete local communities than to abstract, universal ideals. They respond well to the people who surround them in their lives of faith.

So what might be the hallmarks of faith communities that “buck the trend”? These are my tentative thoughts ...

- A strong emphasis on adult faith formation and the cultivation of adult faith practices.
- An intentional approach to tooling parents with practices for living out faith in the home.
- The development of cross-generational mentoring relationships with children and young people.
- An openness to be shaped by the gifts, passions and faith expressions of children and youth.
- A focus on facilitating the involvement of children and youth in ministry initiatives that make a discernable difference in their communities and/or the world at large.

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