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The Relational Church: Being for and with Youth

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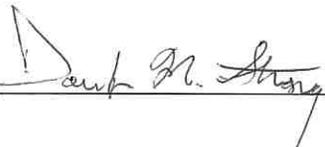
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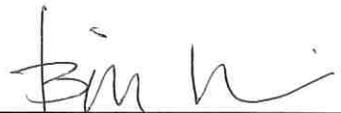
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Abstract

The mainline church, present with youth, could begin to recognize the presence of youth in our worship services, prayer teams and leadership teams as adding value and depth to the community of believers. Youth outside of the church are hurting and desperate for belonging. Youth need relationships; youth need Jesus! Despite the church's history of marginalizing youth, declining numbers and seeming irrelevance amongst the current Generation Z youth, the church can fulfill a vital role in seeing youth as people created in the image of God, allowing God's church to reach our hurting world by way of the young people in our midst. It will take a repentant church that trusts God to lead us on this journey alongside youth, knowing that our hope is in Jesus and not in the systems and power structures of humans.

Introduction

Youth minister Brock Morgan speaks of the need for a church that “integrates” youth into its community.¹ Rather than needing a church that makes them into adults, what overstressed, expectation-ridden teens need is what Morgan describes as an “atmosphere where students feel free to express who they are in the moment.... In the midst of the adolescent roller coaster ride, the grace we give them might be one of the only places where they’ll find it.”² A church who recognizes youth as people created in the image of God could revive our churches from the inside out. Our churches could love our whole communities in the name of Christ by fully accepting youth as people. The

¹ Brock Morgan, *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World: A Hopeful Wake-Up Call* (San Diego: Youth Cartel, 2017), 127.

² Morgan, *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World*, 115.

mainline church, present with youth, could begin to recognize the presence of youth in our worship services, prayer teams and leadership teams as adding value and depth to the community of believers.

The mainline church, including, but not limited to Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Baptist and Methodist congregations, once dominant in American communities, has largely lost its edge by losing its youth. Despite a number of contributing factors to church decline, the marginalization of youth has impacted the church. The church's loss of youth began when children and young people in general were relegated to lesser parts of the church away from the main worship service: separate youth rooms, youth buildings and musty basements. Theologian Carol Howard Merritt shares a story from writer Ana June recalling a Sunday school experience when she was a little girl going to church with her grandparents:

The Sunday-school room smelled like barf. Strongly, deeply like barf. And everyone, kids included, tried to pretend that all was normal. There we were, singing and playing churchy games in a barfy room, and there was absolutely no missing that odor. No mistaking it.³

The separation of young people from the main congregation during Sunday worship sent a message to the next several generations of children and youth that the church does not value them until they are older or more mature. A look at numbers from the United Methodist Church denomination tells the story of a steady decline in the number of Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials participating in worship. UMC church membership and average Sunday attendance stayed relatively steady in the high 9

³ Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 30.

million and 3.6 million range, respectively, through the 1970s, until 1980. In the same decade, youth in seventh through eleventh grades in Sunday school and groups numbered nearly one million, declining to 644,000 in 1980, just as the first of the Millennials were being born. By 1990, youth numbers had dropped to 502,000, a fifty percent decline from the early 1970s. Subsequently, over the next three decades the UMC membership numbers dropped from 9.5 million in 1980 to 6.3 million in 2020, while the average Sunday attendance fell by half from 3.6 million to 1.8 million.⁴

In Stanwood, where I live and work in youth ministry, the United Methodist Church had at least 30 active youth attending each week when I worked as youth director there in the early 2000s. Twenty years later, my family still attends the church. Our 10 year old is usually the only child in regular attendance, and the youth we bring with us on Sundays are usually the only youth in the church now. One of the 30 regular former youth group members still attends on Sundays. He is on staff as the tech guy.

Instead of embracing the youth in our midst, the mainline American church of the past century has segregated congregations into groups based on age. Youth and children have been removed from meaningful participation in the Sunday worship service into parts unseen—like the barfy basement. This holding pattern known as Sunday school or youth group successfully sends the message that the church doesn't want young people. Churches often declare that “youth are the future” or “you will be in charge someday,” setting an illusive goal of “spiritual maturity” as the boundary between adults and youth.

⁴ The General Council on Finance and Administration for The United Methodist Church, *Annual Report* (Evanston, IL: GCFA, 1976-1990), various. “The United Methodist Church Online Directory and Statistics,” *UMData*, 2022, <http://www.umdata.org/UMFactsHome.aspx>. Numbers rounded to the nearest tenth of a million.

Church worship services are designed mostly by adults for adults. Any church leadership by the youth is often contained to an annual event known as “Youth Sunday.” Separate youth programs, youth rooms, and youth buildings are often built to accommodate youth until they age out of the church. With its outreach teams the church has successfully marketed itself as not for young people. Youth know to stay on the outside.

Churches that wait for youth to return as young adults are finding that fewer and fewer do. Merritt gives the example of “Shelly,” a Millennial youth who grew up in a Presbyterian church that Merritt pastored. After Confirmation, Shelley disappeared except for Christmas and Easter and occasional communication while in college. The congregation waits, hoping Shelley will come back in her 30s, after marriage and children.⁵ Their wait will likely be in vain. A 2014 Pew Religious Landscape study found that those identifying as Christians in the U.S. dropped from 78.4% to 70.6% of the total population, while the mainline denominations dropped from 18.1% to 14.7%.⁶ The Millennials and Gen X’ers are now the parents of the current generation of youth, commonly referred to as Generation Z. My ministry in Stanwood spans nearly 22 years. Not only have I ministered to Millennials, but I now work with the children of the Millennials—Gen Z. Most of these teens are a generation removed from meaningful participation in faith communities or even Christmas and Easter church attendance. Most of the students who attend church at all have only attended with their grandparents.

⁵ Merritt, *Tribal Church*, 89-91.

⁶ Alan Cooperman, ed., “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center*, 12 May 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

Church/Parachurch context

Stanwood United Methodist is exemplary of a mainline church struggling to reach youth in the 21st Century. Most of the regular attendees are older than my wife and me (we are in our mid-forties). The church is located in the heart of downtown, near city hall, and close to an elementary school and Stanwood Middle School. The church is populated by congregants mostly over the age of 60. My family is the youngest family in the church. SUMC became our church home when I was on staff, but upon first glance by a casual observer, my younger family seems out of place in a congregation of majority retirees. SUMC has not staffed even a part time youth director in at least six years. Reaching the budget is an annual challenge and youth ministry is seemingly lower on the list of budgetary priorities.

The budget challenge, in part, is brought on by an aging and increasingly smaller congregation. According to United Methodist Church denominational statistics, in the nine years prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2011-2019, the average Sunday attendance at SUMC declined by 35%, from 153 to 99.⁷

Despite being a low budget priority, the SUMC congregation sees enough value in youth ministry to partner with a local parachurch organization Youth Dynamics. YD runs a teen drop-in center three blocks from SUMC called The Spot. It is open for all middle and high school youth on Tuesday afternoons and Saturday nights. In addition, YD runs a weekly rock climbing club for local students to go climbing at a nearby rock gym and

⁷ The General Council on Finance and Administration for the United Methodist Church, "Membership/Attendance Stanwood United Methodist Church," *UMData*, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/5n8hs8x5>.

outside during the optimal spring and fall season. YD sees value in partnering with the local church. Its mission statement reads: “to invite and challenge youth to a lifelong adventure with Christ and His church.”⁸

The Spot is staffed by a team of adult volunteers from various area churches. A common goal of these volunteers is to share the love of Christ with students, accepting them as they are, and giving them an opportunity to begin a relationship with Christ and ultimately to find a local church to call home. The Spot meets in a building that looks less like a church and more like a home, with a pool table in the living room and endless snack food in the dining room. Indeed, the students refer to The Spot as a family. Most of the ministry’s value lies in the relationships that youth form with adults and each other. Students from different backgrounds come to The Spot, but one thing they have in common is that they are usually on the outside of the middle/high school social order. Students from two middle schools, a high school and an alternative mid/high school come to The Spot. A portion of the students live downtown in the same neighborhood as SUMC. The relational model of the ministry feeds into the adventure arm of the ministry, YD Adventures.

Outdoor guides from three different adventure bases outfit and run trips for youth in the summer—everything from whitewater rafting to alpine mountaineering. This relational adventure ministry is the main program. When YD students from the year-round ministries attend the adventure trips, this is known as *sweet spot* ministry. Since the leaders’ time isn’t taken by excessive programming, their time is freed up to go where

⁸ Youth Dynamics, “About,” 2022, <https://yd.org/about/#mission-statement>.

the youth are, including at the schools, the skate park or the Haggen grocery store parking lot. YD leaders take a genuine interest in the students they minister to. The majority of the students YD reaches would not be reached by a traditional church. By going into the community and being Christ in the flesh amongst teenagers, YD leaders are the only church that many of these students know. This is due, in part, to the marginalization of youth by the church that is complicit with the marginalization of youth by American pop culture.

Marginalization of youth

The marginalization of youth began in the mid-20th Century, as post-WWII America became the most prosperous economy the world had ever seen. Adolescents, no longer children and not yet adults, began to be seen as a market. Theologian Kenda Creasy Dean observed that in an American economy built on capitalistic consumption, “advertisers searching for new markets began pitching adult toys and child make-up.”⁹ What youth lacked in maturity they made up for in money. Wall Street embraced teenagers with open arms. Corporations began to capitalize on this new class of independent consumer with driver’s licenses, selling everything from hamburgers to cigarettes. Advertisements were piped directly to young consumers via the latest communication technology, television.

Around this same time, the mainline church began to grow concerned about losing their young people to the forces of Hollywood—teen rebels who listened to rock

⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), 78.

and roll and smoked cigarettes. Influenced by successful parachurch organizations such as Young Life and Youth for Christ, churches began to hire their own youth staffs and hold events specifically for youth. For the first time in history, young people had their own space in the church separate from the adults: a separate pastor, a separate youth room, even a separate night of the week.¹⁰ Oftentimes youth programming mirrored youth culture with a club atmosphere, popular music, extreme games designed to entertain and a short relevant message or talk about Jesus. This spoke to the youth generation in a way they could understand and was a popular ministry model through the 70's, 80's and 90's.¹¹

The downside to the popularity of separate youth ministries was the sucking sound of youth draining from the main Sunday morning church services. Youth ministry author and speaker, Mark Yaconelli observes, “The youth are quarantined. They’re placed at the margins – incubated in basements or gathered at off hours when the congregation won’t be disturbed.”¹² This began the generational slide we are in today, with 59% of Gen Z surveyed reporting that “church is not relevant to me.”¹³

The lack of spiritual lives in youth has perhaps allowed for even more targeted marketing in the digital age. Social media and on-demand video streaming are catching

¹⁰ Morgan, *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World*, 127.

¹¹ Morgan, *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World*, 127.

¹² Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 44.

¹³ David Kinnaman, “Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z,” *Barna*, 24 January 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

up to television as the dominant medium.¹⁴ TikTok recently surpassed Google as the most clicked website.¹⁵ Today's teens and tweens comprise a huge market that advertisers can directly target via ads sent straight to their devices. In addition to television, ads can be sent directly through websites, gaming platforms, social media and traditional sports and movies. "Influencers" now control much of the trends in teen culture. Many teens are trying to get followers on social media such as TikTok or Instagram to become the next influencer of fashion trends, video gaming or cat videos.¹⁶ Despite huge numbers of followers or, in a previous generation of youth, huge numbers of "friends" on Facebook, today's youth often find themselves less in the presence of actual humans than ever. The decline in the physical time spent with their peers inversely trends with youth being more plugged into their devices than ever.¹⁷

Jean Twenge, psychology professor and inventor of the phrase, *iGen*, and author of the book by the same title, concludes that GenZ'ers spend a whole hour per day less with friends in person than the previous two generations. Screen time has replaced all the positive benefits of socio-emotional development that used to come from in-person

¹⁴ Jessica Bursztynsky, "About one-quarter of U.S. TV time is spent watching streaming services, says Nielsen," *CNBC*, 17 June 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/wsxks4ft>.

¹⁵ Joao Tome and Sofia Cardita, "In 2021, the Internet went for TikTok, space and beyond," *The Cloudflare Blog*, 20 December 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/8y44a6sy>.

¹⁶ Werner Gyserlast, "What is an Influencer? Social Media Influencers Defined," *Influencer Marketing Hub*, 27 January, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p97tk2y>.

¹⁷ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, 2017), 51-52.

relationships.¹⁸ Twenge interviewed Kevin, a 17 year old high school student who concluded his peers are so dependent on their phones that it is difficult to carry on a conversation with them. ““They make, like, the fake online friends. Some people, like, help cheer you up online, but you don’t really know them, so you can’t really have a deep relationship.””¹⁹ Twenge points to the connection between unhappiness related to the increase in screen time activities versus traditional ways of interacting such as sports or religious activities and draws a link to the increasing mental health challenges of Gen Z. One thing Gen X middle schoolers never had to deal with was the combination of cyberbullying along with development of identity and body image issues.²⁰ Several other sobering observations Twenge gleaned from her sociological research on Gen Z include:

- Eighth graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of depression by 27%, while those who play sports, go to religious services, or even do homework cut their risk significantly.²¹
- Teens who spend more than three hours a day on electronic devices are 35% more likely to have at least one suicide risk factor.²²
- Teens who are cyberbullied are 66% more likely to have at least one suicide risk factor, such as thinking about suicide or making a plan, than teens who are just traditionally bullied at 9%.²³

¹⁸ Twenge, *iGen*, 71-72.

¹⁹ Twenge, *iGen*, 73.

²⁰ Twenge, *iGen*, 79.

²¹ Twenge, *iGen*, 82.

²² Twenge, *iGen*, 84-85.

²³ Twenge, *iGen*, 85.

Feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety and increases in teen suicide are serious mental health conditions made worse by the lack of sleep. Twenge noted, “Sleep deprivation also has a significant effect on mood: people who don’t sleep enough are prone to depression and anxiety.” She also concluded, “Teens who don’t sleep enough are more than twice as likely to report higher levels of depressive symptoms versus those who sleep more (31% vs 12%).”²⁴

The marginalization of youth has a real impact on local youth in Stanwood. The Healthy Youth Survey – polling sixth, eighth, tenth and twelfth grade students throughout Washington State every two years – collects all kinds of data about students’ lives relating to their physical and mental health. In 2018, the last year statistics are available, the numbers for Stanwood-Camano School District included:

- 52% of eighth graders and 71% of twelfth graders felt nervousness or anxiousness within the past two weeks.
- Bullying had occurred through social media, phones or video games for 19% of eighth graders, 18% of tenth graders and 10% of twelfth graders, while receiving sexual photos or videos climbed from 19% for eighth graders, to 34% and 35% for tenth and twelfth graders.
- On an average school day, 48% of sixth graders and 71% of tenth graders spend three or more hours on “screen time” activities, not counting schoolwork.
- Just over 27% of tenth graders and about 50% of twelfth graders have had sexual intercourse with nearly 53% of those twelfth graders doing so without using a condom.

²⁴ Twenge, *iGen*, 116.

- Asked if they had seriously considered suicide within the past year, 12% of eighth graders and nearly 27% of twelfth graders said “yes.” For high school sophomores, that number was nearly 30%.
- When students felt sad or hopeless, about 55% of eighth graders and 62% of twelfth graders said they did not have an adult to turn to for help.²⁵

In 2016, Snohomish County had the dubious distinction of leading the state in suicides amongst 10-24 year olds.²⁶

Clearly young people are hurting. Clearly the church needs to reach young people with the hope of Jesus. Unfortunately, the church is failing to reach the youth of Gen Z. *iGen* author Twenge has drawn some conclusions based on her analysis of data on Gen Z. Most youth in the US who identify as religious are Christian, so when Twenge says *religious*, she is mostly referring to Christianity.²⁷ She found that, by 2016, a full third of young adults did not identify with a religion.²⁸ Twenge noted two things at play. First, the parents of young people were less affiliated with religion (remember those Millennials the church helped marginalize in the early 2000s?). Second, young people made the decision not to belong to a religion anymore.²⁹ Twenge tells the story of James, a 20 year old who has a transgender brother, ““It’s very important to me that my relationship with God and my relationship with religion is sound in my own mind instead

²⁵ “Healthy Youth Survey 2018,” <https://www.askhys.net/FactSheets>.

²⁶ Sharon Salyer and Kari Bray, “Snohomish County exceeds statewide rate for youth suicides,” *Everett Herald*, 2 October 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9e3bud>.

²⁷ Twenge, *iGen*, 120.

²⁸ Twenge, *iGen*, 121.

²⁹ Twenge, *iGen*, 122.

of trying to find fulfillment through the church.’ “...Their challenge now is to find a church that supports both their identities and their deep Christian faith.”³⁰ Twenge mentions fewer young people believing the Bible is the inspired word of God, fewer young people praying and young people attending church. “Overall, iGen is, with near certainty, the least religious generation in US history.”³¹

Twenge mentions that one of the reasons young people are disinterested in church is “too many rules.”³² A generation ago, the mainline church also struggled with rules, both written and unwritten. Merritt, speaking for the Millennials, asks, “Can we stop expecting them to abide by an invisible rulebook, and allow them the space and opportunity to nurture their own spiritual traditions in our congregations?”³³ Yaconelli points out what should be a priority for the church, “We love young people by seeing them as they are, not as culture judges them to be or as we wish them to be.”³⁴ This spiritual vision for youth or seeing youth as Jesus sees us leads us to an important reason for the the church to continue to reach young people in the U.S.—a practical application of theology in ministry with youth.

Theological argument for a way forward

Youth ministry professor and author Andrew Root believes youth ministry is a “theological task, a task that seeks to participate in God’s own ministry by moving from

³⁰ Twenge, *iGen*, 126.

³¹ Twenge, *iGen*, 126-29.

³² Twenge, *iGen*, 137-41.

³³ Merritt, *Tribal Church*, 143.

³⁴ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 105.

experience to reflection to action.”³⁵ He builds off of Martin Luther’s “theology of the cross” because he says it “bravely enters into the darkest corners of human hells, claiming God’s presence there through the cross of Christ... God’s unveiling (and, as such, our salvation) is in the place of suffering—ours and Christ’s.” This “place-sharer,” as Root refers to Jesus, is standing for, advocating for, being a representative for, and with the other. He quotes Douglas John Hall, “Jesus is with us so unreservedly that he may represent us before God; and Jesus is with God so unreservedly that he may represent God to us.”³⁶

Root is saying two things for the church to hear. “First, it means that the cross and resurrection are an invitation to live in the deep relational life of God, who gives God’s self for the love of humanity. The *theologica crucis* claims that our neighbor is no longer lost but forever found in the suffering humanity of Jesus... Second, to love the other in relational solidarity.”³⁷ Instead of the church-sanctioned entertainment of youth (that I was complicit in during the 1990s and into the early 2000s) Root is suggesting something of real substance for the church as a way to relate to youth who may be in our midst or most likely outside of our walls. As part of humanity, we are all loved because Christ first loved us. The ultimate expression of God’s love is to walk *relationally* with youth as God walks *relationally* with us.

³⁵ Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 49.

³⁶ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn In Youth Ministry*, 56.

³⁷ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn In Youth Ministry*, 57.

Us is not just the paid youth workers or even those of us who work with youth outside of the church walls but everyone in the congregation being for and with youth. Root poses these questions: “How do we teach others to be representatives for adolescents? How do we draw from this perspective in intentional interdisciplinary work within the congregation?”³⁸ Root continues by asking: “Have youth workers(the church) helped adolescents see and participate in representation? Do youth workers(the church) see their part in helping adolescents themselves become representatives of Christ for the world?”³⁹

Youth work outside of the walls of the church has focused for some time on relationships with youth for the sake of relationships through parachurch ministries such as YD. It is through relationships and truly investing in the lives of youth through time spent, or presence, with them that youth know an adult is with them in life—all of life, good and bad. This is where the parachurch excels when it comes to sharing the love of Jesus with youth so that they have a chance to know Jesus and begin a relationship with him. The challenge for the church is being receptive to youth so that they can find Christian community where they feel valued for who they are.

One of the reasons youth come to The Spot is the community. Youth often describe it as “family.” The Spot is for youth ages 11-19. Youth the same age within the church often find themselves aged out of a highly programmed youth group upon high

³⁸ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn In Youth Ministry*, 60.

³⁹ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn In Youth Ministry*, 61. Parenthesis mine.

school graduation. What if the church could be a place where youth feel like they are part of the family for life?

What if we saw the presence of youth at church as actually adding value to our community? This hermeneutic would transform a relationship that has been marginal in the past (separate youth rooms, separate worship services, separate Sunday schools). At the same time, one must acknowledge the difference between adults in positions of power in the church and teenagers who so badly want to establish identity, find calling and discover purpose. Too often, these youth find themselves on the outside looking in.

Youth adopted into the family of God as full people created in the image of God can help a congregation carry out its covenant-derived purpose while at the same time helping include youth as part of the family of God. Youth can help a church “strengthen ministries,” faithfully participate in its ministries by [their] prayers, [their] presence, [their] service, and [their] witness”⁴⁰ just as well as adults, probably differently and perhaps better. Merritt speaks to the mainline church, “Because the fabric of our society depends on intergenerational tribes, it is in everyone’s interests to guard, maintain, and nourish those connections between older adults, young families and single people.”⁴¹ Many of the youth who come to The Spot are from “non-traditional” families, with many of them not being from two parent households. In Snohomish County, more than 5% of

⁴⁰ The General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church, “Baptismal Covenant I,” 2008, <https://tinyurl.com/3nddnj6n>. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Merritt, *Tribal Church*, 23.

youth surveyed live with someone other than their parents.⁴² Diana Garland, former dean of the Baylor School of Social Work writes: “In God’s kingdom, ‘God sets the lonely in families’ (Ps 68:6).”⁴³ She said, “Family is a lifelong journey of learning depths, extents, implications and skills of loving another human being as unconditionally and completely as is humanly possible. This love witnesses to our connection to the God of love.”⁴⁴ Youth need this kind of love from the family of God, the church.

What does loving and including youth look like?

First Presbyterian in Bellingham “adopted” me when I was only 19, a college student living six hours away from my family and struggling to figure out my calling and life purpose. This active church was an intergenerational congregation with a huge college group, small groups led by students and opportunities to serve and be involved in the main church. The church took a risk by letting a 19 year old serve as one of their volunteer youth leaders. I participated not only in college small groups but in intergenerational small groups, dinners after church, and was even “adopted” by several of my youth surrogate families. I had many mentors, formal and informal, to bounce my confusing young adult life off of. Over the next three years, I realized God was calling me into a life of ministry and service. That calling didn’t come by accident. When I reflect on the five years that I attended First Pres, the intentionality of the people loving a

⁴² “Healthy Youth Survey 2016 Snohomish: County Grades 6, 8, 10, 12” (Olympia, WA: Looking Glass Analytics, 22 May 2017), <http://www.askhys.net/library/2016/Co31MultiGr.pdf>.

⁴³ Diana R. Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 93.

⁴⁴ Garland, *Family Ministry*, 212.

college student well led me to where I am today. I felt valued and loved by this congregation and they gave me opportunities to love their youth.

Garland points out, in Matthew 1:16, that Jesus himself is adopted into the genealogy of David, “Joseph claimed him as his own, named him and grafted him into the lineage of David.”⁴⁵ God took a chance on a young David even though King Saul tried to discourage him, “You can’t go out and fight this Philistine... You are still a boy”(1 Sam 17:33 CEB). God used David in a mighty way that day. David trusted God to deliver him from the Philistine, triumphing over this mighty warrior and leading the Israelite army with a sling and a stone.

Paul was clearly a mentor to the young disciple Timothy, yet Paul trusted him with ministry responsibilities in Ephesus while he was away in Macedonia(1 Tim 1:3 CEB). In what is possibly the most quoted verse in youth ministry, Paul instructs Timothy: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young. Instead, set an example for the believers...”(1 Tim 4:12 CEB). Just before this, Paul exhorts Timothy to “command” and “teach,” based upon hope in “the living God, who is the savior of all people, especially those who believe”(1 Tim 4:10 CEB). These words declare God’s active commissioning on the young Timothy, one of God’s saved people. The testimony of what God did through Timothy is an exhortation to those in leadership, that we serve a God who knows better than we do who should lead, and to trust young people to lead.

⁴⁵ Garland, *Family Ministry*, 93.

Jesus was a young adult during his entire earthly ministry right up to the moment he died on the cross.⁴⁶ In his hometown, he was known only as the child of his father, Joseph (Matt 13:55 CEB). Jesus' mother, Mary, in the process of faithfully answering one of the biggest calls in human history, gave birth to the Son of God when she was a teenager (Luke 1:38 CEB). God created young people in his image and as such God clearly uses youth to usher in the kingdom!

Students are hurting and seeking love that only Jesus can provide. Where does a church, rooted in a couple thousand years of tradition, begin to embrace youth for who they are? Yaconelli says young people want adults who care for them, but few find any who truly have time or interest in them.⁴⁷ “What would it mean if the goal of our ministries was simply to be prayerfully present to young people – to allow them to be fully themselves?”⁴⁸ This is call back to basics, a hard look at ourselves as Christians and congregations. The following is an assessment of some simple ways we as the church can make an impact for the kingdom of God by loving young people now.

Prayer

Prayer is a good place to start. The more we practice contemplative prayer, the more we can engage with young people. Yaconelli says, “It’s this movement from prayer to presence—from being open and available to God to being transparent and accessible

⁴⁶ The United Methodist Church defines “young adult” as 18-35 years old. <https://tinyurl.com/57zkyn25>.

⁴⁷ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 111.

⁴⁸ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 121.

before teens—that is the real work of ministry.”⁴⁹ Yaconelli describes contemplation as simply “the experience of being vulnerable to God in the present moment.”⁵⁰ When we are vulnerable before God, youth will see our example. Not only will youth know that we pray but they also will see the fruit that is borne when we submit our lives to God. Dean says, “Not surprisingly, where youth and adults pray together and often, youth ministry typically receives a fresh bolt of energy.”⁵¹ Contemplative prayer is not a program, curriculum or set of rules. Contemplation is being present!

Presence

Presence can be shared between youth and adults by intentionally breaking bread together. Spending time over a meal is something Jesus did with his young disciples a lot. Notable is the particularly touching account of the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-26), from which our sacrament of Holy Communion is derived. Yaconelli reflects on meals with youth: “As I look back on my time at that church, I’m convinced the care we put into greeting kids and serving them dinner was probably our most effective communication of the Christian life . . . times of eating, talking, and laughing together around a table prepared with love and care.”⁵² In the Healthy Youth Survey, nearly 12% of sixth graders and 31% of twelfth graders surveyed marked “rarely” or “never” for how

⁴⁹ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 99-100.

⁵⁰ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 102.

⁵¹ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn In Youth Ministry*, 170.

⁵² Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 116.

⁵³ “Healthy Youth Survey” 2016.

often they ate dinner with their family.⁵³ Meeting youth where they are and listening to them over a meal is a powerful opportunity for adults to be Christ incarnate.

Small groups

Listening to youth and being present can also be achieved through small groups. In intergenerational small groups, stories are shared, and the Bible is interpreted through fresh eyes and new perspectives. Yaconelli says: “Young people can be passionate about God and ultimate meaning in a way that elevates or even carries the faith of those around them. They can embody a heartfelt compassion for suffering and marginalized people that is revelatory to adults.”⁵⁴ Youth ministry consultant and author Mike King says: “Being closely connected in community with others is instrumental to how we view our church experience, how we pray, how we hear the Holy Spirit and how we read Scripture.”⁵⁵ God uses youth to encourage, challenge and grow adult Christians and the church through small group communities.

Another benefit of small groups is belonging. At SUMC, Connexion groups give folks an opportunity to be part of a closer family within the larger church family. If one misses worship, no one may notice. If one is absent from their Connexion group, they will get a phone call. It is impossible to blend into anonymity for teens or older adults who are part of these intergenerational groups. Yaconelli says: “When youth are seen, they feel valued. When they are heard, they feel respected. When someone is moved by

⁵⁴ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 36.

⁵⁵ Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students Into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 157.

their situation, they feel loved. When they receive kindness, they feel cared for. And when others delight in their existence, they sense the very breath of God.”⁵⁶ These words are true for anyone when they find community in the family of God.

Worship

The covenantal family of God, the church, worships together. Constance Cherry says: “The starting place in understanding Christian worship is to recognize that worship flows from the person and work of God.”⁵⁷ Worship that includes youth needs to look different than usual Sunday mornings in the church sanctuary if we truly worshiping intergenerationally. Yaconelli says that “ministries of distraction” designed to be a holding pattern until youth are old enough to participate in church only hinder them: “While such ministries may keep youth entertained, they often keep youth distracted from the deeper rhythms and practices of the Christian faith.”⁵⁸ Youth are capable of leading in Sunday services now by reading Scripture, leading liturgy, or singing on the worship team or in the choir. These are all opportunities that would be available to participate in standard church worship services that, perhaps with some training, youth could do. This may take some work, but it is God’s work worth doing. It may stretch comfort zones to perhaps move worship to a space outside the sanctuary, or perhaps not on a Sunday morning, and have the liturgy lived out in new expressions as youth contribute to the body. Merritt says this will take the form of new communities:

⁵⁶ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 121.

⁵⁷ Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 3.

⁵⁸ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 45.

If the members become intentional about ministering to younger generations, they will move away from assimilating the new people into existing customs and begin the process of forming new communities. The body will become more aware of the gifts and needs of that particular group and respond to them by teaching the traditions of belief and practice in a more fluid way, not rigid, way.⁵⁹

New expressions of worship or new communities will only be possible if we listen carefully to young people. Yaconelli describes why going back to the basics of listening well to youth is paramount: “We love young people by seeing them as they are, not as the culture judges them to be or as we wish them to be.”⁶⁰ It is in this listening that the church could learn from youth and dream up new expressions of reaching our culture with Christ. We must do this together and with a mind open to the Holy Spirit’s leading. It may spring from small group experiences in community on neutral ground such as The Spot. It might mean a Saturday afternoon worship service at the skate park, complete with skate demonstrations where skater kids can offer their gifts of skating to God. One positive outcome from the COVID-19 pandemic is the flexibility churches had to show to continue to be viable worshipping communities: from the internet to the parking lot, Sunday morning experienced a myriad of change in a short amount of time. What if the loss of youth and young adults was a similar emergency? Maybe our systems and structures that make up Sunday morning worship are just that, *ours*. Recognizing *who* Sunday morning worship belongs to is a good place to start. It takes the pressure off of us to realize that God invites all of us to worship our Creator.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Merritt, *Tribal Church*, 85.

⁶⁰ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 105.

⁶¹ Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 4.

Mission

Churches open to the Holy Spirit can discern God's mission. Darrell Guder says that the global church realized a theocentric, or God-centered approach to mission by the mid-20th century. "The church of every place, it realized, is a mission-sending church, and the place of every church is a mission-receiving place."⁶² This is true of a church located in the middle of a specific neighborhood and God's work of mission is both from and to the church. Adults and youth can carry out the *missio Dei* as faithful servants living in community with one another in the places where they are called to bear witness. This can manifest itself in many ways, but in the context of downtown Stanwood, several unique opportunities present themselves. These opportunities for the family of God to serve are intergenerational and outside the walls of the church building. Three blocks away from Stanwood UMC and a block from The Spot is Josephine Caring Community, a retirement home. Adults and youth could pair up and visit residents in Josephine, some of whom live far from family members. This could be an opportunity for mutual listening, but most of all an act of love and care to bring the church to older adults who find traveling to church a challenge. Perhaps youth could help lead the Sunday afternoon services at Josephine, again providing an opportunity to share their gifts. Maybe a Connexion group comprised of youth and adults can meet at Josephine to help alleviate transportation issues and invite youth into the home turf of older adults. Maybe that same group could meet at The Spot so that the older adults could visit the teen drop in center.

⁶² Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 81.

Another amazing ministry to the downtown neighborhood is The Gathering Place, a Thursday night meal served at Our Savior's Lutheran Church, right next to The Spot. Each week a different church serves the weekly meal. The Gathering Place hosts people from all walks of life in Stanwood: older adults, people with special needs, people who are homeless, and busy youth workers and their families. This is an excellent opportunity not only to pair up adults and youth to serve a meal, but also to practice hospitality and table fellowship, giving the youth themselves an opportunity to meet people where they are and listen.

Discernment in deciding how to meet the needs of the neighborhood is important. In the work of mission, many different possible ways to serve can come to mind. In ministry, we always have more work to do; often the needs of people in a broken, sinful world seem endless. A qualitative ministry of presence is always more in line with the Spirit than a quantitative ministry of doing more. Yaconelli cautions: "We don't know how to be with our kids. We know how to entertain them, market to them, test them, and statistically measure them. . . . As a result today's youth have become more and more isolated, alienated and left to fend for themselves within the molesting arms of the corporate media culture."⁶³ A church deciding on doing one or two things the congregation can do to be present for and with youth is better than hiring a twenty-something youth director and expecting that one person to minister to all the needs of a group of students by finding volunteers to staff a myriad of programs, each on a different night of the week and Sundays.

⁶³ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 19.

Re-creation

Instead of succumbing to the busyness of culture around us, it is important to *be still* (Psalm 46:10 NIV). It will take the Holy Spirit to lead us into deep and meaningful relationships with students, but it takes time and space to receive from the Holy Spirit. We need to make the time and space in our busy lives of ministry to experience God before we do anything else. Jesus was busy in ministry at times but he also retreated to the wilderness to spend time with his Father. Ashley Denton, director of the Wilderness Ministry Institute, says: “Jesus’ rhythm of labor and retreat models a vital principal for us today, that the right *starting place* for ministering to others is *rest*, not busyness.”⁶⁴ Rather than entertain youth and thus falling into the trap of busy American consumerism, it is important to intentionally seek out quiet in our always noisy society. Times of retreat and prayer are important for us to unplug and receive love from our Savior so that we can share that love with students and see them as Jesus sees them. King says, “The most important thing we bring to our ministry is a heart seeking the face of God and a life that is truly lived in God’s presence.”⁶⁵ When that happens, we can truly see our youth as *imago Dei* and lead our churches to see youth as *imago Dei*.

Youth who are created in the *imago Dei* also need time in God’s creation to be re-created, leaving behind busyness, bullies, consumerism and, of course, their phones. Trips in the wilderness give youth an opportunity to rest from a noisy culture where it is difficult to hear God. River trips or mountain trips can give youth opportunities to get

⁶⁴ Ashley Denton, *Christian Outdoor Leadership: Theology, Theory and Practice* (Fort Collins, CO: Smooth Stones, 2011), 70.

⁶⁵ King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, 181.

out of their comfort zone, overcome fear, learn new skills, and work together in Christian community. Andrew Root says that outdoor trips “help [youth] face the crisis of reality itself, to help them recognize that they are small and near death, that they are in need of a God who acts to cross the abyss to meet them.”⁶⁶ Ultimately, experiences such as a seven day backpacking trip help youth come to grips with their limits, realize that they are inadequate, small and vulnerable in God’s creation. Youth who are created *in the imago Dei* need to depend on their Creator rather than all the stuff of life that insulate people in America from knowing God, knowing ourselves and knowing each other.

Christ agents in our midst

Youth minister Brock Morgan reminds us of the grace found in allowing youth to be free to be who they are.⁶⁷ Youth ministry expert Kenda Creasy Dean suggests we see youth as “agents” rather than “objects” of mission.⁶⁸ If we take this approach, it will be possible to see our experiences with youth as opportunities to learn from the living God. Those of us who are not young are not well equipped to navigate the youth culture in which we find ourselves. We could let teenagers be our guide. A good missionary is a student of culture, and the best teachers are in our midst; we just need to be ready to be led. Missional theologian Ben Conner suggests the church should always see itself on mission: “God’s mission must be the starting point for the theological enterprise, and ...

⁶⁶ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn In Youth Ministry*, 180.

⁶⁷ Morgan, *Youth Ministry in a Post Christian World*, 115.

⁶⁸ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 148.

it must inform and orient the way the Christian faith is practiced.”⁶⁹ We have to open the doors and tear down the walls of our churches and let Jesus out. With open doors and without walls, we may let in those who need God’s grace the most, and they may not look, talk, or act “right,” but that may be closer to who Jesus calls “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40). Not only do teens need the church, but those of us in the church also need to be listening to and learning from teens because they are Christ in our midst, a presence that is not always easy.

Eschatological hope

Nothing is more eschatologically hopeful than God’s kingdom on earth! The reign of God is something to which the Holy Spirit moves us as a church every day. Do we perceive it? Dean says we deal with double anxiety: youth are anxious and the church is anxious. Youth feel anxious, unloved, lonely, sad. The church is in decline, unable to be open to creativity or reflection because of the hyper focus of fight, flee, freeze or protect.⁷⁰ Dean says:

Jesus calls us to be a youthful church, not because we are young but because we are his. Nothing is more important for a youthful church than developing an eschatological imagination, which allows us to wait with confidence, to name our anxieties without fear, and to make room for new life and new possibilities as Christ works, unseen, to usher us into an unknown future... The future makes us young, and the future belongs to Christ. Fear not.

Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

⁶⁹ Benjamin T. Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 17.

⁷⁰ Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn In Youth Ministry*, 206-08.

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (Is 40: 30-31 NRSV)

Repentance and surrender

Young people are literally dying from lack of hope, purpose and belonging. The mainline church must repent of its treatment of young people in the recent past. The church must strive to include youth as full people created in the *imago Dei* to worship, love and serve God. This journey will require deep reflection on past mistakes as the church takes concrete steps, some named above, to stretch our comfort zones and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us to hopeful new places as youth and adults on God's mission together. Yaconelli reflects: "To share the Christian life with young people means to let God be God, and trust that our desire to share our faith will be enough. To surrender means to recognize that we don't control how God lives and moves. We don't control our churches. And we certainly don't control the spiritual lives of young people."⁷¹ If the church can let go of power and control, we, youth and adults together, will be able to strive for and participate in the full potential God intended for God's kingdom on earth!

⁷¹ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 72.

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