

Leaders' Perspectives on Youth and Youth Ministry: Insights and Discoveries

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Life depends on relationships that are channels of blessing among the whole, which their minor calculations can't quite figure out. I am talking about a more fundamental life issue – the flow between generations that sustains the life of us all and those to come.¹

When youth leaders, including those who study youth and youth ministry and other practitioners gather, our conversation understandably evolves into hearty exchanges about both the promise and the challenges of ministry with today's youth. The question arises, "Who, really, do we understand youth to be?" Insights come from first-hand experiences, research, and what others have said or written about the social location and critical concerns of today's youth. We share our own and others' observations about the youths' connectedness to our faith communities and engagement in religion and liturgical practices. The vocational direction of youth enters our talk time. We raise the importance and impact of the wider culture of relationships of youth on them and us; and, we acknowledge the challenge of what must be done relationally and programmatically with and on behalf of today's youth.

The contexts for these exchanges vary from ones like the late 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. sponsored Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth, to youth worker conferences such as the one held at Interdenominational Theological Center in November 2007, to unplanned informal meetings and focus groups. Regardless of the context, the interaction is important because of the learning that results from it. We gain new or renewed awareness that our youth are bombarded with so much in today's world from all sides. But, they have a remarkable resiliency that speaks to a hope that comes from God. Shared thoughts and experiences of this kind generate new insights and discoveries about the nature, needs, and hopes for our youth and youth ministries. We are reminded, to use one leader's words, that "youth are a gift to be shared and not a problem to be solved." Moreover, regardless of the context, it is not simply the answers to questions and information we gain from one another, or the insights we form. What

so many voice is a quest—a calling—to shape ministries that foster a future of hope for our youth and blessings for us all. A discernible *telos*, or a deeply felt theological direction emerges. As one leader said:

The youth in my church and ones I know outside church hunger for adults to notice and treat them in a positive way. They need to know that they are valued creations of God and gifts to us. They have something to contribute and need places that welcome them and their talents. I confess that I'm not always successful in my efforts to make this happen. Really, I don't always know what to do or how to do it. But, I know it's my responsibility to do whatever I can that will make a difference in their lives. God has called me to ministry with youth. So, I intend to keep on knowing that God will bless my best efforts. Really, a lot of us are needed to put forth a lot of effort to assure the best for our youth. After all, they are our youth.

In what follows, attention will be given to some key parts of the conversations among leaders, further reflections on the content, and some thoughts about a *telos* for youth ministry. Specifically, focus will be on views of youth, social location and issues of youth, youths' connectedness to faith communities and engagement in religion and liturgical practices, youth and vocational direction, youth and a culture of relationships, and blessing and hope as a *telos* or generative purpose for being and relating with youth.

Views of Youth

In conversations and in writings about youth, the terms for youth vary widely. Terms such as “children,” “youth,” “teens,” or “teenagers,” “young adults,” “college students,” and “emerging adults” reflect various images of those in adolescence. Importantly, the varied language reminds us that there are, in fact, different ages/stages of adolescence. For example, Thomas East and John Roberto draw on research from the Search Institute's *Troubled Journey* and *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth* studies to describe two stages of adolescent development.² These stages include young or adolescents from 10 to 14/15 years old and older adolescents from ages 15 to 18/19. Described in terms of developmental needs, the early stage of adolescence is a period of:

- self-definition that entails adolescents' definition and acceptance of who they are individually, their exploration of the social world and their place in it, as well as their developing positive orientation toward their own culture and ethnicity;
- competency and achievement discovery, including becoming aware that others whom they respect value not simply what they are capable of doing, but

- encourage personal and group accomplishments;
- positive interpersonal skills development, including learning to relate with adults amidst growing autonomy, forming positive peer relationships, and becoming connected to caring adult role models and advisors with whom to share experiences and receive guidance;
- decision-making in families, schools, church, and community organizations in matters that impact their lives and that result in both an affirmation of their presence as valued members and opportunity for skills development and use;
- physical activity needed for bodily growth and development;
- creative expression through activities such as music, art, writing, drama, sports that allows for testing out the self's creative interests, feelings, abilities, and thoughts;
- personal religious experience that entails an exploration of life's "big questions and one's personal relationship with God; and
- structure and clear limits provision that are needed for decision-making skills; staying on task and persevering in efforts that affect success and self-esteem; and for assuring safety and contributing to living with joy and confidence.³

In the two-stage schema of adolescent development, older adolescence is a period of:

- exploration and experimentation with a widening array of roles, behaviors, attitudes, relationships, ideas, and activities that assist the adolescent's self and faith identity and ethnic identity;
- adult sexuality formation including the development of understandings of the sexual self and healthy values and attitudes toward sexuality.
- interpersonal relationships building with peers, parents, and others based on a safe environment and growing autonomy;
- meaningful roles establishment in church, community and society including showing active concern for local and global issues, engaging in community service, and involvement in decisions, plans and implementation of programs that serve adolescents;
- preparing for the future through acquiring competencies, setting goals, and exploring life options;
- personal value system and decision-making skills formation that entails Christian moral values formation and making moral judgments amidst conflicting values and norms;
- personal faith identity development including exploring questions of faith, forming a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and discerning meanings of living as a persons of faith in today's world; and

- adult mentor relationship formation that entails entering into relationship with affirming, caring, listening, self-disclosive, encouraging adult Christians with whom questions may be asked, and critical thinking and reflection may be undertaken.⁴

In recent years, the view of three-stages of adolescence has come into being based on what is called the lengthening of adolescence. These stages include early adolescence ((ages 10 - 14/15), midadolescence (15 - 18/19 covering the high school years and the first years out of high school), and late adolescence (aged 20 to the late 20s). Jeffrey Jenson Arnett presents this new stage as a period in which emerging adults learn to stand alone. It is a period marked by the gradual development of character qualities such as impulse control, independent decision-making, and responsibility-taking in one's personal, relational and financial life, in preparation for ongoing life and in cases of those entering into marital relationships.⁵

Awareness of Challenges

The lives of today's youth differ from those in their age groups even a generation ago. Yet, today's youth are often judged according to yesterday's teens. Youth today are the first generation born during the media technology explosion that has moved beyond satellite TV, the Internet, cell phones, and DVD players, to MP3 players, Blackberries, to ever advancing interactive gaming systems and more. Mass media, particularly TV and the Internet, impact the developmental trajectory of youth, especially with regard to role model formulation, the formation of up-close face-to-face relationships, and views of sex and normative values, beliefs and tolerance regarding sexual behavior.

In citing the difference between earlier generations of youth and today's youth, Nichols and Good indicate that sex was exploited in 1900 through advertisements in magazines; but, compared to today's standards, sexual images and conduct were far more conservative.⁶ These researchers also noted that:

By the 1950s, and with the emergence of TV, sex was sold more explicitly. . . Still, in comparison to today's media, the 1950s generation was one of sexual modesty. . . Today, the portrayal of sex in the media is insidious. More than one half of television programming has sexual content, and some have estimated that as many as 65,000 instances of sex are portrayed during the afternoon and early evening hours. Television viewers—especially teenage viewers—are literally bombarded with sexually explicit material.⁷

Although reporting on youth crime is shown to be exaggerated by Nichols and Good, there is no escaping the concern for violence in the schools, the disturbing trend of treating juveniles as adults, and the recent prison-building boom, that highlights a tragic dis-invested orientation toward youth.⁸

Unfortunately, adults develop perceptions and attitudes about youth culture via mass media that result in a negative critique and devaluation of youth. It is not uncommon for adults to use negative adjectives such as *rude*, *irresponsible*, and *wild*, and for parents and non-parents alike to point to what they perceive as youths' growing character deficits.⁹ This situation among adults is called *epebiphobia*, or a fear and loathing toward adolescents.¹⁰

With specific regard to the youth in today's climate of negative perceptions of them, alongside our individualistic, material, and media and advertising culture, what we hope will happen in their developmental stages is not always what actually takes place. They confront very real challenges in their journeys across the developmental stages. In particular, Chap Clark discovered through conversations with practitioners and focus groups that many of today's midadolescents experience deep woundedness and displacement that hampers their positive identity formation. These youth feel betrayed by adults and mistrust adult-run systems and tend to form an "alternative world" and live out whatever identity is called for in a given environment.¹¹

Timothy Clydesdale also found that, in their first year after high school graduation, many midadolescents experience life's complexities to the degree that they become "locked" in a routine of simply managing daily life. They become preoccupied with everyday management and forego or place on hold what we understand to be the normal developmental tasks of preparing for the future, and caring for with their religious, civic, political, gender and racial identities and roles. Their situation limits needed reflection on vocation and their social development.

Of course, midadolescents are not alone in their experiences of challenges that profoundly impact their developmental journey. They, along with youth in the other stages are shaped by other life's realities over which they have little or no control. One of these concerns pertains to children of divorce. One study led by Elizabeth Marquardt found that, as children of divorce grow up, they are less likely to be part of a faith community and are, overall, less religious. Of particular note is the report of grown children of divorce who were active church participants at the time of their parents' divorce, that neither the clergy nor the congregation reached out to them.¹²

Awareness of Promise

In spite of the challenges that inform the developmental task accomplishment

and trajectory of youth, the promise of youth still emerges brightly. Leaders in the Youth Hope-Builders Academy (YHBA) of Interdenominational Theological Center, which I direct, often hear youths' stories of immense trauma resulting from divorce, incarcerated parents and siblings, family abuse, experiences of racism, and the ravages of being poor. Yet, the assault to the youths self esteem and identity formation engendered by these experiences tell only one side of the story. The other side reveals a remarkable resiliency that surfaces in and after the disclosure of traumatic life events. The youth articulate meanings of resilience or the ability to continue on with hope in creative writings on hope, spoken prayers, musical expression, liturgical dance, and mime. They demonstrate as well that spiritual formation can and does proceed even when their "backs are against the wall."

In the narrative pedagogy project with youth, Frank Rogers saw the promise of teens in the energy, interest, creativity, and honesty with which they entered the project's storytelling, creative writing, and drama experiences. The teens were able to see evidence of the sacred in God's activity in the world in ways that affirmed their unfolding spiritual formation.¹³ Rogers' project and the Youth Hope-Builders Academy experiences highlight that "seeing" promise in today's youth depends on the opportunities we offer them to demonstrate their gifts. It requires what Rogers calls "pedagogical effectiveness."

The Social Location of Youth

The tasks that are part of the adolescent stages apply to all of the youth within each given stages. However, conversations of leaders about today's youth and writings and research on youth reveal some very important differences. The earlier reference to children of divorced parents is one difference within a wide range of demographic and situational differences, comprising the social location of youth. Indeed, today's youth represent a complex mix of race, language, class, gender, family configurations, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that have earned them the title of "the Mosaic generation" (those born between 1984 and 2002). Moreover, in our mobile society and interconnected global village, youth who participate in youth ministries and reside in our communities come from regions across the United States and the world.

Conversations among leaders reveal not simply the importance of our consideration of the social location of youth in ministries we develop on their behalf, but that there are instances when special attention is warranted. Leaders highlight the particular social location of Hispanic and other youth such as those from Africa and Asia who were born in the United States to immigrant parents or who are immigrants along with other family members. In these situations, language and cultural barriers must be taken into consideration. Moreover, these barriers form and intensify within families

when youth who were born in the United States gain English proficiency and develop Western cultural habits that contrast with those held by their parents. The resulting generational differences contribute to a cultural and generational gap that requires attention. In contrast to this situation, youth who themselves are immigrants along with their family members require special attention that takes on new shape when they are undocumented residents.

With specific reference to Hispanic teens, the work of Carmen Cervantes in *Instituto Fe y Vida* (Institute for Faith & Life) calls attention to Hispanic youth ministry leadership based on her finding that Hispanics make up nearly 50% of all young Catholics in the United States; but, only 5% of youth ministers are Hispanic. She also found that Hispanic youth appear in four distinct categories, including:

- immigrant workers, who are primarily Spanish-speaking or bilingual, of low-socio-economic and educational attainment level, and seek the church on their own;
- mainstream movers, who are primarily English-speaking or bilingual, born in the United States of middle- or upper-class immigrant parents, college educated or college-bound, and apt to leave the Catholic church;
- identity-seekers, who are typically United States born, from lower middle class immigrant parents, bilingual, struggling with low-self-esteem, having difficulty completing school, and seeking refuge in drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity; and
- gang members and high-risk youth, who are typically United States born, inner city residents, poor, poorly educated, unemployed, angry at society, and may be habitual drug users/sellers.¹⁴

Whether with Hispanic youth or youth of other ethnic-cultural groups, ethnic-cultural differences are realities that demand response. In this regard, I highlight the social location of Black youth to which attention must be given. These youth “are unique in their disproportionate representation among the poor and jobless, among school dropouts, in single-parent households, in foster care, and in youth detention facilities. They are more apt to engage in sexual activity at earlier ages than other youth.”¹⁵ However, their high school completion rate continues to increase and their religious faith and activity are highest compared to those in other racial groups.

Importantly, there is no single set of characteristics that apply to Black youth. There is wide diversity within this ethnic-cultural group. However, Beverly Tatum reminds us that “for Black youth, asking ‘Who am I?’ includes thinking about ‘Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?’”¹⁶ The task of identity formation in the adolescent stage of development is undertaken by Black youth in racial terms. In light of this reality, I have consistently found Black youth to be hungry for and empowered by “culturally authentic” and “culturally appropriate” opportunities to build

their self-esteem and shape their lives in positive ways. This means hearing their stories, using resources that reference and picture them, and recognizing the complexity of their social location. It also means preparing youth leaders who enter into conversation with one another, community agency personnel, and other practitioners in order to:

- gain insights into the concerns, issues, and worries of the youth;
- learn effective strategies on how to communicate with youth about taboo issues;
- receive and review resources that will help direct them as they make pertinent decisions concerning youth;
- discover ways of inviting parent participation and partnering with community agencies; and
- build approaches to empower youth to use their gifts and agency on behalf of themselves and others.¹⁷

While youth leaders are called to recognize and respond to issues of social location, the youth themselves must confront the differences among them. Evelyn Parker's contribution to the conversation around youths' sensitivities to social location is helpful because she affirms that youth are capable of working through conflicts arising from the differentness of others. She was aware that bringing together youth from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, refugee and immigrant families into the Perkins Youth School of Theology at Southern Methodist University could be a recipe for conflict and chaos. But, when these differences are viewed as assets for building community, youth are capable of building and embodying values, trust, justice, and even humor. They are capable, in fact, of getting a glimpse of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of the "beloved community."¹⁸

Youths' Connectedness to Faith Communities and Engagement in Religious and Liturgical Practices

Those who work with and study youth convey a mixed picture of the connectedness of today's youth to Faith communities and their involvement in religious and liturgical practices. Researchers have revealed that youth and young adults today may maintain connections with the faith communities in which they grew up; but, they may differ from previous generations in the frequency and level of this connection, knowledge of church polity, and adherence to behavioral norms. William Dinges found that young adult Catholics in the United States tend to "choose" church rather than becoming involved out of obligation or obedience to tradition. Even though it is clear that they are not alienated from the Church, they are, nonetheless, uncertain about or lack knowledge of the Church's history, tradition, and symbols.¹⁹

Carol Lytch's study of teens in three congregations—a Catholic congregation, an

evangelical protestant congregation, and a mainline protestant congregation—confirms as well that church-affiliated youth do not necessarily acquiesce to a faith that is passed on to them. They don't see their embrace of the faith tradition in which they were nurtured as obligatory. Rather, it is a choice that includes a process of negotiation. Youth may also weave elements of popular culture and other sources into their practices of the religious tradition they embrace. Lytch's contribution to the conversation on today's youth on which she elaborates in *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*, is that youths' choice of faith results from changes in American society that favor individual choice that is not bound by religious institutions and traditions. In this climate of choice, churches will need to attract teens and will be able to do so "if they get beyond the superficial solutions to youth ministry and address teens' deep human needs to belong, to believe, and to be competent. They can hold teens if they get serious about teaching the faith and introducing teens to an experience of the holy."²⁰ Moreover, it is essential that we welcome the what teens can teach us about how to live the Christian faith in the current new social context.²¹

Leaders set forth a number of cautions. Based on his observations, Bill Bixby let us know that there are many young people who are practicing theology and are persistent in their quest to make sense of God and God's ways in the world; but, there are still a number of young people who are skeptical about an even alienated from churches. As a result, he proposes that there is need for "a truly bilingual way of life, a radically theological way of life, a theologically radical way of life with young people."²² Melissa Wiginton's point about young people who are called to ministry was that "most bright capable, passionate young people entering theological education or preparing for ministry are not deeply committed to the church as an institution even as they recognize the need for and gifts of community in the life of faith."²³ A necessary part of these college students' journey forward is their gathering together to explore ministry, discover that they are not alone, and that "the church is much bigger than they imagined."²⁴

A report on findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) pointed to youths' "benign whateverism" approach to religion in which religion operates in the background of their lives. Or, as Robert McCarty said, religion in the lives of young people today is "often unfocused and implicit, important but not a priority, valued but not invested in, and praised but not describable."²⁵ At the same time, Christian Smith's report of the NSYR's longitudinal study findings show a wide range of youths' responses to religion from intense religious devotion to complete disconnection from religion. He added that "most teenagers in the United States are "incredibly inarticulate about their religious beliefs and faith. However, teens who are more committed to religious beliefs and practices tend to have more positive self-image, greater happiness in life, lower frequency of risky behaviors such as oral sex, sexual intercourse, and substance abuse."²⁶

Findings from others also suggest that youth who are immersed in liturgical practices develop awareness, appreciations, and competencies, including leadership abilities like those discovered in the Youth Hope-Builders Academy (YHBA) of Interdenominational Theological Center. Fred Edie also found that in many instances, high school youth are capable of far more learning, participation and leadership than congregations ask of them.²⁷

It is appropriate for leaders to want to know about youths' faith community connectedness and related attitudes and practices from a multi-faith perspective. This perspective was not omitted at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth. R. Stephen Warner's report on findings from the Youth and Religion Project targeted variations in the salience of youths' religious identity and loyalty to religious communities among Christians, Muslims, and Hindus of White, Hispanic, African American and Asian background. Warner found an enthusiasm among Muslim youth who were born into their faith communities and similar enthusiasm among African American college students as well as among Hindus who were mostly second generation offspring of immigrant professionals.²⁸ Rhys Williams also mentioned being struck by the emphasis of college-age Muslims on knowing the faith and being familiar with scripture, traditions and stories of the Muslim faith.²⁹

Youth and Vocational Direction

Three key insights and discoveries were shared at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth. First, youth and young adults desire and need opportunities to explore vocational direction or to answer the questions: Does God have a plan for my life? To what is God calling me? What does Christian vocation mean? Youth and young adults discover answers to the questions through open exploration and engaging in key practices or what Jennifer Grant Haworth called "first principles." For her, "first principles" that are applied to young adults' exploration of vocation involve:

- putting a "human face" on vocation by showcasing the "real world" of others' call stories;
- communicating and respecting the individual and intimate nature of vocational calling;
- engaging individuals in experiences such a journaling through which they can reflect on their passions, values, and priorities, examine their desires, gifts, and joy, and relate their insights to their faith;
- involving individuals in fieldwork or service-learning through which they can discern their gifts and how best to use them;

- teaching individuals kinds of experiences/exercised that assist their vocational exploration; and
- creating safe, supportive, and non-judgmental spaces to explore vocation.³⁰

Haworth added to her insights the importance of family, friends and mentors as well as the young adults' self-awareness, critical life events, with diverse people, and perspectives on faith and spirituality in considering vocational direction.³¹

Second, David Horn attested to the early development of a vocational call to ministry in high school youth and the ability of youth to be committed to their vocational direction. However, youth need support for their calling and a place, opportunity, and a language to explore it.³² In this regard, youths' vocational discernment or striving is impacted by key roles played by parents who carry out what Joyce Mercer calls "believing in them out loud."³³

Third, the conversations highlighted that we need not assume that all youth attain a sense of clarity about their vocational direction. Vocational discernment and sense-making is a "work in progress" through which youth may struggle, feel pressure, and even agonize. Yet, even amidst the struggle or lack of clarity, they can arrive at a sense of clarity with those who care to walk the journey of discernment with them.

Youth and a Culture of Relationships

Conversations among youth leaders and those who study youth confirm over and over again that youth are in search of real relationships within which they can test out, learn from and gain perspectives on the real stuff of daily life they are experiencing. Recognition of this search is what Susan Hey calls a shift "from youth ministry as fellowship to youth ministry as relationships and ministry opportunities."³⁴

In her shared insights at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation, Dorothy Bass pointed specifically to her learning from young people that their faith formation happens "in the midst of doing and being together as adults and youth accompany one another in addressing real questions, needs, and concerns."³⁵ Her observations and that of many others revealed the importance of a "culture of relationships" that involves intergenerational learning, the influence of parents and other adults, mutuality in teaching and learning and in leading and following. The power of this "culture of relationships" was captured in the following insights and discoveries:

- John Roberto discovered in his intergenerational learning project that an intergenerational "culture of relationships" benefits not simply the youth, but the entire parish community.³⁶

- Diane Millis found in her Companions on a Journey program that young adult women gained vital self-reflective and self-affirming capacities, spiritual awakening, and attunement to God through companionship experiences.³⁷
- Gene Roehlkepartain found that youth develop spirituality within a culture of relationships that is multi-contextual with family, congregations, peers, school, neighborhood, media, and other socializing systems playing a role.³⁸
- Melissa Wiginton found that “most young people who are seriously drawn to ministry, and who have requisite capacities, have been shaped by a complex of experiences in congregations, youth groups, camps and families through which they are loved, educated in faith, challenged to think, enabled to lead, and encountered by the Spirit.”³⁹
- Michael Hryniuk,⁴⁰ Dean Borgman⁴¹ and others found that youth are attracted to and learn the faith from adults who are both mature and spiritually alive.
- Mark Yaconelli’s interviews with youth revealed that “young people aren’t interested in the words their teachers are speaking as much as the life and soul from which these words arise.”⁴²
- Carol Lytch,⁴³ Robert McCarty,⁴⁴ and J. Bradley Wigger⁴⁵ observed in their work that, within the culture of relationships, parents are the greatest influences and primary religious educators in faith transmission to youth although Wigger reminded us that economic and cultural forces often make difficult family time together.⁴⁶ Still, youth mirror the adult world—attitudes, lifestyles and aspirations. Young people are barometers of cultural and institutional conditions in wider society. Indeed, Robert McCarty emphasized: “Literally, young people are us.”⁴⁷
- The culture of relationships was broadened by Don Richter’s reference to conversations with biblical and theological texts. Richter told about teenagers who “can be drawn into conversation with biblical and theological texts when these texts have personal power and significance for their teachers; [teens] can engage in writing that flows from collaboration, shared story, and communal practices. . . [The] importance here is that, at the center of this relational paradigm is the idea that life is created together and youth become more than passive recipients or learners. They become teachers who teach us how to play with or to be ‘playfully serious’ with theological concepts and ideas.”⁴⁸

Of course, the culture of relationships is not without its flaws. John Witvliet pointed to relational brokenness which results from worship and youth formation ministries that work in isolation in many congregations. In these instances, youth are left on the periphery and on the negative side of competing visions and criteria for music, visual arts, prayer practices, and sermon illustrations.⁴⁹ Karen Marie Yust also found instances of diminished value placed on children’s experiences and discomfort among volunteer teachers in entering into frank discussions of difficult issues even though children continue to overcome the obstacles.⁵⁰ Moreover, Thomas Bergler shared his

finding that efforts to mainstream youth in the church or to let them take charge of their own programs often resulted in lessened investment in them by the church.⁵¹

The insight shared by Stephen Warner remains a compelling reminder that youth are best served by a culture of relationships that includes a diversity of adult role models and mentors. It is understood that the nature of this diversity and how it is viewed will vary from one religious community to another. For example, White mainline youth tend to speak in complex organizational terms while African American youth speak of church as family. Similar views of the church as family are embraced by Hispanics and many Asians. In fact, Warner cites this view as an inspiration to others.⁵² In my particular African American context, the term, "village" has been given renewed salience because, in our sharing together as leaders, we lament the loss of its functions in many instances. Communal solidarity on behalf of youth and the provision of guidance, and support are essential "village" functions and are pivotal to youths' formation of a valued identity and hopeful life direction.⁵³

A *Telos* of Blessing and Hope

I began this recall of exchanges among youth leaders and those who study youth and youth ministry with a quote by Gary Gunderson that "life depends on relationships that are channels of blessing among the whole." The thoughts of a leader followed later that "youth are a gift to be shared and not a problem to be solved" and that there are many adults who tell of a quest—a calling—to shape ministries that foster a future of hope for our youth and blessings for us all. In these thoughts lie a *telos* or direction for our relationships with youth and a purpose for our ministries with them.

The use of the word, "blessing" points us in the direction of a view of youth as an inextricable and valuable gift to the human family and community given by God. God has blessed our families and communities with the young who, by the modeling and guidance we give, become the channels of vitality, health, and longevity—the future—for our families and communities. However, the modeling we give as adults in family, church and community life—in the "village"—begins with our welcome of or hospitality extended to youth because of our gratitude for their gift to us and so that they, too, might become a welcoming presence in the world. And, central to our welcome is a listening stance in which the focus shifts from ourselves to the youth. It calls for us to abandon ourselves—the busyness of our lives—in order to enter into the lives of youth, knowing that our presence together does not preclude pain and bewilderment but that it nonetheless opens the way for our youth to grow up in Christ.⁵⁴ It calls for us to create the blessing of "home" where care for the youths' physical selves and the deep concerns of their lives abide and where we create an attitude and a way of being for our youth to see, experience, and emulate.

There is another important aspect of welcome and it is that there is blessing and mutuality in welcome, especially when we recognize the giftedness of youth and give them a place to share their gifts in the family, church or community life. But, there is a caution. Especially in congregational life, organized programming exists as a key way of involving youth. But, to use Christine Pohl's words, "The personal and communal responses are crucial, and if there is a move toward programming, it should be with programs that open into relationships."⁵⁵ Pohl also reminds us that "contemporary cultural emphases on efficiency are very powerful, but life-giving hospitality is rarely efficient and often inconvenient. Opportunities for hospitality frequently come to us as 'interruptions' in our task-oriented culture. Hospitality is countercultural and requires rethinking of our priorities."⁵⁶

In my own research, I have found that today's youth "are calling for attention. And it is not so much a 'notice me' attention as it is the kind of attention that validates the importance of their lives, experiences, feelings, and intentions. . . A fundamental goal is to assure youth that we care about them, their fullest awareness of who and Whose they are, and their development of their potential for hope-building."⁵⁷ Indeed, we reach this goal by assuring the earlier mentioned pedagogical effectiveness. In practice, it entails the kind of attending that centers on:

- inviting young people into telling their life-experience stories as means of prompting reflection, connections with biblical and religious stories, and imagining meanings and responses;
- helping young people to discern God's activity in their stories and to choose to participate in the unfolding story of God's activity in their lives and in the world; and
- providing an intergenerational context of relationships with hands-on experiences that continue to center on story-sharing, the spiritual formation of youth, and the education of leaders, that make possible ongoing creative ministries.⁵⁸

Intergenerational attending is pivotal in today's society where inattention to our youth abounds, and where the consequences are seen in their loss of meaning, love, and purpose. Indeed, it is an important reminder to us all that, when we welcome youth, accept the stage of adolescence they are in as a gift from God, and attend to them, hope opens before us, in the form of the release of purpose, and faith.⁵⁹ And, it is hope not just for the youth, but for the whole of community and life itself.

Notes

1. Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life* (Memphis, TN: The

- Center of Excellence in Faith and Health, Methodist LeBonheur Healthcare, 2006), 127.
2. Thomas East and John Roberto, *Guides to Youth Ministry Leadership* (New Rochelle, NY: Don Bosco Multimedia, 1994), 9-16.
 3. Ibid., 10-11.
 4. Ibid., 13-14.
 5. See: Jeffrey Jenson Arnett, "Learning to Stand Alone: The Contemporary American Transition to Adulthood in Cultural and Historical Context," *Human Development*, Vol. 41, 1998:295-315.
 6. Sharon L. Nichols and Thomas L. Good, *America's Teenagers—Myths and Realities: Media Images, Schooling, and the Social Costs of Careless Indifference* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004), 83.
 7. Ibid., 93-94.
 8. Ibid., 80-82.
 9. Nichols and Good present findings of a 1997 study showing 67% of adults used the indicated negative adjectives. Moreover, the proportion using these adjectives increased to 74% in a 1999 study. See: Sharon L. Nichols and Thomas L. Good, *America's Teenagers—Myths and Realities: Media Images, Schooling, and the Social Costs of Careless Indifference* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004), 10-11.
 10. See: Kirk A. Astroth, "Are Youth at Risk?" *Journal of Extension*, Vol. 31(3), Fall 1993. See p. 2 of printed version online: <http://www.joe.org>
 11. Clark shared his findings at the November 7-8, 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth, Indianapolis, Indiana. Also see: Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005).
 12. Marquardt's findings were summarized at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation. Also see: Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (Landover, MD: Crown Books, 2005).
 13. Frank Rogers summarized the nature and outcomes of his project at the 2006 Lilly Endowment Consultation. His publication, *Finding God in the Graffiti: Narrative Pedagogy in Practice*, is in process.
 14. Cervantes' research findings were summarized at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation. Also see: Carmen Cervantes, *Latino Catholic Youth and Young Adults in the United States: Their Faith and Their Culture* (Stockton, CA: Instituto Fe y Vida, 1999); the booklet by Carmen Cervantes, "Pastoral Juvenil Hispana Youth Ministry, and Young Adult Ministry: An Updated Perspective On Three Different Pastoral Realities," Instituto Fe y Vida, 2007; and "Social Profile of Next Generation of White and Hispanic Leaders," <http://www.emergingmodels.org/newsarticle.cfm?id=16>
 15. These characteristics were shared by me at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc

- Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth. They also appear in: Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, ed., *Keep It Real: Working With Today's Black Youth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), xiii.
16. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 52-53.
 17. These preparatory measures were the center of the conference sponsored by the Youth Hope-Builders Academy for youth leaders entitled "Revival of Hope: Moving Youth Ministry From MySpace to God□Space." The conference was held at Interdenominational Theological Center, November 10, 2007.
 18. Evelyn Parker summarized her findings at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation.
 19. William D. Dinges' study findings were shared at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation. See also: William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, and Juan L. Gonzales, *Young Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2001).
 20. Lytch's findings were summarized at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation. The complete study findings appear in: Carol E. Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). The quote here is found in Lytch, *Choosing Church*, 13-14.
 21. Lytch, *Choosing Church*, 14.
 22. Bixby's observations were shared at the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation and was based on his involvement with youth in the Theological Education with Youth (TEY) Program at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia/Gettysburg.
 23. Wiginton's observations were shared at the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation and were based on the involvement of college students in the Undergraduate Fellows Program of the Fund For Theological Education (FTE).
 24. Ibid.
 25. McCarty's summary of the National Study of Youth and Religion was shared at the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation. He was referring to the National Study of Youth & Religion, a research project that was conducted between August 2001 and August 2005 for the purpose of enhancing understanding of the religious lives of American adolescents.
 26. Smith's summary remarks were shared at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation. The National Study of Youth & Religion was conducted under his direction. The complete findings are detailed in the publication: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
 27. The insights Edie shared at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation were based on his observations of youth in the Youth Academy for Christian Formation at Duke Divinity School.

28. Warner's findings were shared at the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation, and reflect outcomes of his work in the Youth and Religion Project. Also, although not focused precisely on youth, diverse religious communities of the post-1965 diaspora are explored and analyzed in: R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, editors, *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigrants* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
29. Rhys Smith's comments were shared at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation and derived from data gathering in the Chicago area.
30. Haworth's shared summary at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation resulted from her work with EVOKE (Encouraging Your Purpose and Calling) at Loyola University–Chicago.
31. Ibid.
32. Horn's shared insights at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation were based on his involvement with the *Compass* program of the Ministry Center for Christian Youth at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.
33. Mercer's shared perspective at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation evolved from both her work with "Children in Congregations" and with the Youth Theology Institute summer academy.
34. Susan Hay's insights shared at the 2006 Lilly Endowment, Inc. Consultation derive from her work as Director of Youth Ministries at the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church.
35. Dorothy Bass' insights come from her involvement in an exploration with a team of youth and adults in the Valparaiso Project at Valparaiso University. Results of the exploration are contained in: Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds., *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2003).
36. Roberto shared on the basis of his Generations of Faith Project. Details of the project are found in: John Roberto, *Generations of Faith Resource Manual: Lifelong Faith Formation for the Whole Parish* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2005).
37. Millis' comment resulted from her role in implementing and evaluating the Companions on a Journey Program.
38. Roehlkepartain's responses resulted from his role in the Science and Theology of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence project, of the Search Institute, funded by the John Templeton Foundation.
39. See prior citation: Wiginton, Undergraduate Fellows Program, The Fund For Theological Education (FTE).
40. Hryniuk's findings result from his involvement in the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project at the San Francisco Theological Seminary.
41. Borgman developed and shared his thinking in his ministry of providing support and information for youth workers and in the publications: Dean Borgman, *When Kimbaya Is Not Enough: A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry* (New York: Hendrickson, 1997); and Dean Borgman, *Hear My Story: Understanding the*

- Cries of Troubled Youth* (New York: Hendrickson, 2003).
42. Yaconelli's words derive from his work in the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project at the San Francisco Theological Seminary.
 43. See prior citation: Lytch, *Choosing Church*.
 44. See: prior citation: McCarty, summary of the National Study of Youth and Religion.
 45. Wigger's insights derive from his work as Director of the Center for Congregations and Family Ministries at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. See also: J. Bradley Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
 46. Ibid.
 47. McCarty, National Study of Youth and Religion.
 48. Richter's insights come from his participation in the Youth Theological Initiative at Candler Seminary, Atlanta, Georgia and the Valparaiso Project. Also see: Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002).
 49. Witvliet gained knowledge of this situation in congregations from his work as director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. See also: John Witvliet, ed., *A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship* (Chorister's Guild, 1999); and *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2001).
 50. Yust's insights have evolved from her role in the Assessment of Children's Ministry Project. Also see: Karen Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
 51. Bergler's findings stem from his work with the Link Institute for Faithful and Effective Youth Ministry.
 52. See the previous citation on Warner's work in the Youth and Religion Project.
 53. A discussion of "village" functions that has come out of discussions of leaders and on which the November 10, 2007 youth leaders' event focused appears in: Wimberly, *Keep It Real*, xviii.
 54. See: Eugene H. Peterson, *Like Dew Your Youth: Growing Up With Your Teenager* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 6-7.
 55. Christine O. Pohl, "Building a Place for Hospitality," pp. 27-36, in Robert B. Kruschwitz, Gen. Ed., *Hospitality: Christian Reflection*, A Series in Faith and Ethics (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University, 2007), 34-35.
 56. Ibid., 35.
 57. Wimberly, *Keep It Real*, xx.
 58. See previous citation on Frank Rogers.
 59. Peterson, *Like Dew Your Youth*, 8.