

Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project: A Revitalized Approach Meets Youth Needs

An Interview with Mark Yaconelli

Director, Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project,
San Francisco Theological Seminary

By Tracy Schier



In an era when most programs and products geared for young people are loud or fast or both, an approach to meeting the needs of youth that is quiet and deliberately contemplative may seem counterintuitive. But according to Mark Yaconelli, the director of the Lilly Endowment-funded Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project housed at San Francisco Theological Seminary, many of today's young people want to encounter God in an authentic way. "Youth today are asking adults to help them stay in touch with the basic questions, to help bring them to the mystical experiences that are at the root of our words and rituals. They want adults to help them meet God."

Yaconelli's insights were rooted in his own experiences as a youth minister. From that knowledge, and from working with collaborators in the YMS Project, efforts have been successful in developing ways to revitalize and reshape youth ministry. Over the course of years, he notes, "I could see that youth ministers and their students were isolated and separated from the rhythms of the congregation. They were marginalized, meeting at different times and places from the adults in the congregation. And further, most formation programs were focused on a transfer of ideas or doctrines. It was a very cognitive approach and did not seem to be meeting needs of young people who were asking questions of faith holistically. They were asking, 'How does this have any bearing on my life?'"

As far as the youth ministers themselves were concerned, Yaconelli relates that in recent years there has been high turnover. "Many felt that they were trying to impart the Christian message by themselves; they felt responsible for the spiritual lives of youth by themselves with little or no collaboration from others in the congregation."

Yaconelli explains further, “In order to develop a new approach to youth ministry, we recognized that youth ministers needed to transform themselves first—they could no longer just read from the curriculum. So the reality is, our program is not just about helping kids do contemplative practices, it is about helping adults pay attention to kids. We wanted to help the adults slow down and see the kids as persons in their own right and as people who are seeking spiritual companions.

“Believe it or not, kids are interested in contemplative practices, but they must be introduced to these practices, and encouraged along the way by adults who themselves are willing to share their own experiences of prayerful meditation and scriptural reflection. When we began to work with adults who would in turn work with youth, we found that many of them, clergy and laypersons alike, expressed their own sense of being spiritually dry or burned out. Many had never even been introduced to the contemplative dimension of Christianity and, sadly, some of them told us that in their ministry they felt merely like deliverers of programs and administrators of projects while the youth were reduced to being consumers of activities. After all, we live in a high-speed culture and these folks are part of that. Slowing down to become contemplative does not come easily, but once people allow the Spirit to awaken in them a new sense of God’s activity in their lives, and to spend time in silence and awareness of their vocation to minister, they begin to experience what they themselves refer to as a conversion. They understand God and their faith and their ministry in a whole new way.” It is when that happens within the adults that they then can become companions to youth in their spiritual seeking.

The first phase of the YMS Project began in 1997 with a three-year Lilly Endowment grant. Fifteen mainline churches across the U.S. were the first to be involved. Their selection for the project was based on denominational, social, economic, racial and ethnic diversity. Individuals within these congregations who sensed a calling to ministry to young people established spiritual formation teams that functioned as intentional spiritual communities engaged in personal sharing, contemplative practices, discernment, and ministry with the youth of their congregations. The teams were especially encouraged to expose youth to the contemplative dimension of Christian faith through engaging and mentoring them in a variety of spiritual exercises such as *lectio divina*, meditation, healing services, the Jesus prayer, chanting, the Ignatian awareness examen, and meditative singing.

In speaking about the project’s first phase, Yaconelli admits a certain amount of surprise that among the sixteen randomly chosen churches, “There was no one that didn’t find contemplation life giving. We had extroverted, wild people who found that these practices really work and who came to realize that things like curricula and mission statements cannot produce a way of life that is truly awake to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

“In the first phase we were successful in reminding adults that they could be alive in Christ and that they, once transformed and living lives of deep prayer and

contemplation, could then attract and transform the lives of the young people to whom they minister.

The lie of our culture is that you have to be cutting edge. With this program we found that young people are not interested in adults or worship services attempting to be trendy and hip; rather they look for adults who are alive in their faith. These kids don't need videos and rock and roll; if the adults are alive and convincing in their own spirituality and relationship to God, then organs are just fine. Young people are seeking to become adults. They need authentic adult Christians to interact with and to learn from in order to become adult Christians themselves."

Yaconelli relates that he and his project collaborators learned that youth ministers need a new language to explore their experience of God. And this new language needs encouragement and practices to bolster it in order that connection to the Spirit is possible. The project, he says, has helped adult leaders to recognize the broken systems that can be so destructive to both their own spirit and to their ministry. Then, it has helped these leaders to learn new ways to be attentive to the work of the Spirit through a deepened focus on contemplation and prayer. Once transformed, the youth ministers are able to develop ministry structures that focus on prayer, community, discernment, and service.

Important to the program's first-phase success was the creation of safe places where the adults could tell their own stories and their own experience of God and the holy, and a place of quiet where they could reflect on this. They were able to attend to the suffering they had experienced in their own lives and pay attention to where they had been too busy to attend to others in their suffering. Yaconelli relates that people would say things like, "The experience gave me permission to claim myself as a spiritual leader, not just a religious administrator." Many of them had to learn that discernment prayer is necessary as a primary skill of spiritual leadership. Others related, "My sense of time is different," "I'm a different person," "I listen more." Program participants found that they experienced a different way of being, a presence to others that they had not heretofore had. And they share that they became more open, trusting, relational, and hopeful, with a greater appreciation of their own gifts as well as their own struggles.

Yaconelli goes on, "The program helps adults slow down and see kids as persons and people who are seeking spiritual companions. Together they can find out how they can be present to God. For such a long time kids have said they were looking for adults who were willing to listen. In the experience of so many kids, adults have simply not been available. They have interactions that are transactional but not relational. The churches we worked with went from one to 10 or 20 adults working with the youth programs. And the kids report to us that they love the adults because they are engaged, alive and interested in them."

In the program's early stages Yaconelli admits that there was reluctance on the part of some to buy into the idea that contemplation practices could be effective in youth

ministry. "There are stereotypes of what contemplation is. It sounds very individualistic and inward, even consumer-driven with the picture of people sitting around on plush couches with candles burning. From the outside, contemplation can look insular; we had to stress that there is a communal dimension that focuses very much on human experience. We all know that many Protestant churches, for example, are very cognitive in their approaches to religion and there is a strong suspicion of practices that focus on human experience."

Week-long training Inservice sessions were an important component for both youth leaders and young people. A total of five of these sessions took place during the grant period's first three years. Participating congregations would send their youth pastor and two ninth or tenth grade students; a church could send up to three additional youth at their own expense. A typical event would include some fifty or more youth and adults, chosen for their perceived gifts of spiritual leadership and the potential to use these gifts for the benefit of their congregation.

The Inservice weeks had five goals with primary focus on forming the youth in the rhythms of Christian life. The goals included giving youth leaders an experience of using contemplative practices with youth and how these practices could be integrated into a formation program. Goals for the youth themselves included helping them pay attention to God in their own lives and the life of their congregations, and helping them see and understand the lives of other Christians from the tradition who have engaged in contemplative practice. Further goals included helping the young participants reflect theologically on the Christian way of life and how spiritual practices are a part of that life, and calling these young people to begin serving their own congregations and communities through attentiveness to God and service to others.

Each day of the Inservice week had a theme intended to follow the rhythms of Christian life and help participants encounter an historical figure who embodied the theme. Prayer practices that engaged the particular theme were also presented. The themes were *call, solitude, the Body of Christ, healing, offering, and go* (evangelism) and they were presented through a variety of contemplative prayer exercises involving bible study, individual and group art experiences, discussion and journaling. Morning and evening prayer involving contemporary forms of meditative singing bracketed each day's activity.

Yaconelli says, "The pastors and leaders we worked with had to be people who were open to their own growth and they had to be comfortable recruiting and working with other adults who would then work with youth. We looked for pastors and leaders with courage and imagination; interestingly, many had been through a tragedy and this experience helped them to be truly compassionate and more able to follow the Spirit."

Carl, a youth leader at a Midwestern parish, says that the YMS Project has had a significant impact on his own life. He notes that the model of helping youth cultivate their own direct experience of God has affirmed his philosophy of youth ministry which

is to empower teens to be spiritual leaders among their peers. He says, too, that the prayer practices he has learned have been the most meaningful aspect of the project for him personally. He gives an example of now praying the Jesus Prayer every time the church bells chime at his parish.

A high school senior named Darbi in Carl’s Midwestern parish says she went to the YMSP Inservice with lots of personal questions, and through the time alone, the time to be herself with God, she says a lot of her questions were answered. She also positively credits the opportunity she had to share her problems with other youth. Admitting that she had always looked up to the youth group president, seeing her as more spiritual than she and “so Godlike,” she was enabled through the Inservice to understand it is ok to be where she is with God. And, she points out that she is more faithful with her journal writing and includes prayers in her journal. Stefanie, a junior at the parish, says that the Inservice made God real to her, as real as a person sitting next to her. An experience of working with the homeless helped her to realize how much she takes for granted and made her “want to be good” and has made her more open to others who are in her life. The Inservice experience also helped her to work on a fraying relationship with her mother, and she happily reports that it is a different relationship now.

Yaconelli says that a challenge to the success of the program has been the amount of transition that constantly goes on within congregations. When the first three years of the project’s first phase were complete, only three of the 16 participating churches had the same ministers. “There is,” he says, “incredible instability in American churches.” With job changes, families moving in and out, parents experiencing divorces, and other types of transition, “We find there are not many stable adults in congregations.”

What young people seem to be asking, he says, is not “How do I become a member of a church?” but rather, ‘How do I stay alive and become truly myself and recognize my vocation?’ They look at adults with so many fluctuating circumstances and fear this will happen to them.”

At an Episcopal church in Colorado, the departure of the pastor and his wife, the youth leader, “left the church scrambling” as one youth put it. Their leaving is a case in point about the sadness, grief, and even anger that can occur among those participating in a youth ministry team who are left to keep things going without strong leadership, in this instance the pastor’s wife. She was seen as the glue that held the youth ministry together, and without her presence, lay leaders felt stretched and overwhelmed and youth programming was severely diminished. Despite this challenge, several church members saw the interim period as “good for the church” because it forced them to create a closer community and elicit individuals’ gifts.

Yaconelli makes it clear that pastors are the gate-keepers in allowing the YMSP approach to youth ministry possible in their congregations. He has encountered some pastors who have restricted this approach from reaching youth or the rest of the church

body and reports of one pastor who, in his reluctance to allow lay leadership in his congregation, has stopped the progress of the project in his own congregation. But, Yaconelli counters, "Pastors that have embraced this approach have allowed it to have a deep and significant impact on their whole church community." Many of the leaders in the participating congregations acknowledge their need for regular retreats, spiritual directors, and the encouragement and companionship of others practicing such a form of ministry.

While the project's first phase included a limited number of participating leaders and young people, it is clear, according to Yaconelli, that many churches are seeking a more organized way of using the YMSP model or parts of it in their youth ministry programs. "We have had numerous requests from all over the country and every major youth ministry publishing company, magazine and organization in North America has contacted us. We simply cannot meet all the requests for training or workshops that we receive."

In order to expand the work begun in the first phase, Lilly Endowment granted YMSP a second three-year grant for a second phase. The goals included inviting twelve congregations representing mainline denominations to begin a ten-year process of integrating YMSP methods and insights into their own youth ministries. These congregations, seen as teaching churches, were to be selected according to their ability and willingness to become a future place of training and teaching to others. A second goal was to invite "points of leverage" within the field of youth ministry (denominational leaders, youth ministry organizations) to begin a prayerful and collaborative process of integrating YMSP discoveries with other good models of youth ministry. The second phase also created a conversation space in which selected churches, denominational leaders, youth ministry researchers and organization can learn the YMSP paradigm and practices as well as share their own knowledge and pedagogies.

Yaconelli notes that in this second phase it became important to involve theologians, Christian educators and youth ministry researchers to evaluate emerging theology and pedagogy of the project. A series of forums facilitated this work and involved a group of six scholars who formed a Theological Consultation Group that met bi-annually. In addition, a Youth Ministry Track at San Francisco Theological Seminary was initiated across disciplines for development of a series of courses focusing on youth discipleship.

In summer of 2004 San Francisco Theological Seminary hosted a National Symposium on Youth Ministry and Spirituality that, along with a website and numerous journal articles and other dissemination products, share the findings and experiences of the projects to scholars and youth ministry practitioners from across North America. A third grant from Lilly Endowment is allowing YMSP staff and consultants to archive papers, collect materials from project participants, and concentrate further on dissemination of the significance of the project's learnings to a wide audience. Yaconelli concedes that there is still need to interpret the contemplative approach to youth ministry in a way that is intelligible to mainline practitioners who may still see it as a "fringe" phenomenon. He

"Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project: A Revitalized Approach Meets Youth Needs"

from the website

Resources for American Christianity

<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/>

says that any characterization of contemplative ministry as a particular style that is not suitable for everyone misses the point. "Contemplative ministry is not just teaching spiritual practices to youth, but it calls for resourcing all ministry in prayer and discernment." Yaconelli plans to continue doing the needed work to clarify this distinction and communicate it to theorists and practitioners.