



A Youth Ministry Manifesto

*What Forty Years in Youth Ministry
Has Taught Me*

Rev. Dr. Terry Dittmer



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Over the years, God has blessed His church with amazing youth.
It's been my pleasure to know and work with a lot of them:
Young people of talent, energy, creativity, playfulness
and most of all, young people of great faith.

This book is dedicated
to those teenagers and young adults from all over
the world who have blessed my ministry.

To my own youth now adults –
Emily, Anna, Erin, Abigail and Jonathan

And to Cherie, my wife, their mother and friend
to so many youth along the way.

To God be the Glory!

On August 11, 1948, the United States Postal Service offered “Saluting Young America,” a first day of issue stamp honoring “Youth Month” which was to be observed in the month of September. It is an interesting coincidence that August 11, 1948 is also the birthday of this writer. And, even if it is merely coincidence, I have always been interested in and committed to working with young people.

My college degree from the University of Missouri – Kansas City was in art education. My goal was to be a high school art teacher. Upon graduation from UMKC, I decided to go to the seminary and graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary then at Springfield, IL. There was a shortage of calls and some creative assignments ensued. My first call was not radically creative but I was called to Lutheran High School in New Orleans. I was to teach religion and any of the fine arts. In other words, my first call included being a high school art teacher.

After two years, my wife and I took a call to St. John Lutheran Church in Farley, MO. Youth ministry was at the top of my list of favorite things about parish ministry. While in Farley, I connected with 12 districts that were planning a regional youth gathering. I served as the local arrangements director for that gathering and did most of the graphic design work. And in 1979, I was called to the Board for Youth Services of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, where I have now served for almost 33 years. An interesting coincidence indeed.

In my ministry, I have been personally committed to the church’s mission to reach the young people God has given us in the families of our congregations and to the church’s outreach mission to un-churched and marginally-churched youth who have little or no relationship with Jesus or with His church.

A poster hangs in my office bearing a quotation from C.F.W. Walther, the first President of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, which reads, “You cannot use your time to better advantage than by serving well the young people of the congregation.” Walther said that to his seminary students, challenging, I believe, those who would be pastors to care for the young. Walther is considered by many, even outside the LCMS, to have been an early advocate for youth ministry. In 1928, in a book titled *The Youth Movement in American Lutheran Churches*, author Gerald Jenny notes, “Dr. Walther must be counted one of the earliest pioneers in young people’s work among Protestant denominations in America and the first to foster a union of young people’s societies.” Walther established a young man’s group at Trinity Lutheran Church, his congregation in St. Louis, in 1848. A young woman’s society was established in 1868. In his honor, LCMS congregations established The Walther League in 1893, an organization with a great history until it and the LCMS parted company in 1968.

Like many things, it seems youth ministry used to be a lot easier. Teens were connected to churches by their families. They generally hung around through high school and they returned to their home churches, for the most part, after they graduated from college or left the military. Churches convened Bible classes for them to relate Scripture to their adolescence angst. Youth groups were popular and safe places for teens to spend some time, usually Sunday evening. In a sense, it was “Leave It To Beaver” church.

It was then, as it is now, young people reflecting and living the faith given to them by their moms and dads. Christian Smith, in his work on the National Study of Youth and Religion, reports that “you get what you are.” Teens reflect the faith, values and ethics of their parents. But these days, those faith, values and ethics are more often un-churched, non-Christian, fly-by-night. It seems like most people are putting

together their values systems and worldviews on a come-as-you go basis. People create a worldview based on what makes them comfortable and what does not get away from the “pursuit of happiness.” Unfortunately, these days, this seems to be true for much of the church culture also.

The Pew Research Center recently released a report on the religion/spiritual connections of young adults. They found the 27% of adults under the age of 30 were strongly connected to Jesus. But they also found that 30% of those under thirty were committed to no one. When it came to faith/religion/spirituality, they had “none.” This new group has no faith; when it comes to affiliation, they have none and are now called “Nones.” It’s not that they are against God; they are not atheists or agnostics. Church? None. God? None. Faith? None. They are the “Nones” and they are a growing demographic.

In many ways, it seems like youth ministry may have lost its footing in the church as well. This is somewhat generational. When Baby Boomers were teenagers and young adults, youth ministry was in its heyday. Boomers, by their sheer numbers, have always demanded attention in society and that included in the church. It was a time of new music played on the instruments of youth – drums and guitars. It was a time of fun and games, of large gatherings of adolescents, of high energy and enthusiasm. Loud. Bold. Exciting. Youth ministry often took on the aura of a rock show with a nod to the Rock of our faith, Jesus Christ.

Now, Boomers are growing older, moving to the top of our aging population. They are still great in number. They are still pretty self-focused. Rather than focusing on young people and their spiritual nurture, older adult ministry seems to be moving to the fore. Young people are often forgotten because “ Boomers” are not young anymore.

Plus, our churches used to be full of young people. “Outreach to youth” in the last half of the 20th century was basically accomplished by giving birth to new children. Following World War II, the returning GI’s gave birth to the baby boom and that boom populated churches. With the aging of the church – and it is aging – we’re no longer giving birth to the next generation of Lutheran Christians. In 1980 based on junior confirmation statistics, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod had a youth population somewhere around 220,000. In 2011, that population was around 95,000.

And we do not know how to do outreach to teens. Cold calls on households certainly are not going to work these days. How and where do we meet teens? What do we say to them? Liability concerns may rear their ugly heads as we attempt to meet and reach teenagers. How do we reach teens without appearing to be spiritual stalkers?

What is the future of youth ministry in the church – any church? Here are some thoughts.

GOD AND FAITH

- **Effective youth ministry begins with Jesus Christ, Lord, Savior and Friend.**

- > This seems fairly obvious, perhaps, but today it is a real challenge. The Good News is that God sent His Son to be our Savior and Friend. But these days, an ominous question looms over our witness. Why, a teen or adult might ask, do I need a Savior and Friend? What do I need to be saved from?
- > The values systems of our world have warped to such an extent that most people do not get the whole idea of sin, of needing a Savior, or of forgiveness.
- > Things like pornography, taking God's name in vain, or cheating on taxes or tests or whatever are not considered "sin" by the general population. When your culture does not acknowledge sin, how do we convince anyone that they need a Savior? One very real challenge ahead of the church is answering the "why" question. "Why does anyone need a Savior?"
- > Our world and society need a new worldview. It means we need to share what God's will is, how bad we are at meeting it and how God has worked things out through Jesus Christ. It means being realistic about our own values and beliefs. I can remember when the TV show "Friends" showed up on a lot of people's favorite TV show list. Honestly, how can a show like that with its bazaar value system be a Christian's favorite show? And yes, I know such a statement will appear to some to be judgmental and biased. But are we living consistent with our faith?

> Youth ministry must start with Jesus. We need to help young people understand their need for forgiveness. They need to know Christ's encouragement. They need to know about heaven and eternal life. And we can make no assumptions about any of those things. Today, most people really do not know much about Christ at all.

We must be prepared to talk about Jesus, what He means to us, how He brings love and peace and blessing.

- **Holy Scripture provides the framework which shapes our understanding of youth ministry.**

- > Effective youth ministry happens when it is guided by God's Holy Word. We begin with what God says.
- > Youth ministry is not really about trends, fads or fashions. And sometimes that is hard because so much of the youth culture is about trends, fads and fashions.
- > What God says in His Word does not always jive with what is being said or modeled in the world. The world largely recognizes no absolute truth. But, God's Word is Truth (John 17:17). It is God's Word. It provides guidance, offers encouragement, and gives hope. It can be trusted.
- > Most of all, God's Word tells about our need for salvation and God's grace and mercy in providing it through Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that we are loved and empowered to love through Christ who covers everything we do.
- > God's Word provides His people with a worldview that informs everything we do. We do not pick and choose what we like and do not like. We take God at His Word. This principle is foundational to effective youth ministry.

- Youth ministry brings youth and adults together as a community of God's people where Jesus is the central focus for celebrating in Word and Sacrament.
 - > Youth ministry is not just about fun and games, entertainment and good times.
 - > It is, first of all, about nurturing the faith in our young. To that end, we teach God's Word. Youth ministry includes open Bibles as youth explore God's relationship with His people. Youth ministry teaches the law and celebrates the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Youth ministry helps young people understand their need for a Savior and to know how God forgives and saves.
 - > Youth ministry celebrates the Sacraments. It helps youth know and understand how God claims them in baptism to be His own as His Holy Spirit works through water and the Word. Youth ministry also brings young adults to the Lord's table where they remember Christ and receive again forgiveness and the assurance of life and salvation.
 - > You cannot do youth ministry without Word and Sacrament. This, too, is foundational to effective youth ministry.

- **Youth ministry demonstrates its concern for young people through outreach, taking the Gospel to un-churched and marginally-churched youth.**

- > A cynic could easily see this point as nothing more than a ploy for the institutional church having a future. After all, cannot it be argued that unless the church attracts new members there will not be much of a church in the future? How will we maintain our buildings and pay our pastors? Will we even have pastors? Will there be youth from which to recruit a new generation of professional church workers? So, this point might appear selfish and self-serving.
- > I prefer to believe that we care about the future, eternal destiny of young people. Fact is, if they do not know Jesus, they do not have much of a future ahead of them.
- > The church needs to develop a heart for outreach. Most demographers and Christian sociologists say people make their confession and commitment to God before they are 18. George Barna even goes so far as to say around the age of 13 or 14. The church needs to develop a conscientious way of bringing the gospel to kids – children, youth and young adults. It might start with “open gym night” but it ends with a testimony, a devotion, a prayer.
- > The Christian life is different. How do we help young people see the value of what we have in Christ? It may take us out of our comfort zone. There are some strange kids in the youth culture. But ultimately, it is about sharing Jesus Christ with them, the Holy Spirit using us to make that happen and then putting His claim on them.

> We need to hear Paul's call to the people in Rome - "How can they hear unless somebody tells them?" (Romans 10:15) But how are we going to tell today's youth about Jesus? What do we say? Or do? What are today's youth going to "hear" from us?

> Bottom line – It is about the salvation of their young souls. That simple. That complicated.

• **Effective youth ministry empowers youth to raise hard questions and find answers about faith and life. Youth ministry speaks to the full range of life issues of youth in the congregation and the community. Youth ministry creates a context where young people can explore and affirm their spiritual faith and what that means for their lives.**

> If a teen cannot ask their questions in church, where can they find an honest and accurate answer? What if a high school boy has a favorite teacher who happens to teach evolution unequivocally? How do we as church share God's truth about creation? If a girl's favorite teacher is living an alternative lifestyle, how do we as church share God's truth about life and morality?

> Teens need an arena where they can ask their questions without fear of condescension or acrimony. They need a safe place, a place where they know they will not be put down. Our response can never be "Because I say so" or "Because God says so." It cannot start with "You little heathen . . ." Our response needs to honor the asker and respect the question.

> We should never back away from a question. We may need to do a little research. But, in this world, a myriad of questions are fair game. We must be willing to talk them through and share an honest response. Where else, but the church, are they going to get it?

- **Young people grow in faith, their personal relationship with Jesus Christ and who they are as God’s people.**

> Bottom line, it is about Jesus, his love for His people, especially His young people. It is saying, “I want young people to know Jesus.”

PERSONHOOD AND VOCATION

- **The best youth ministry is holistic. It is concerned for the welfare of the whole young person, body, mind and spirit.**

> A young person is a complicated thing. There really are no typical teenagers or average young adults. Everyone is different. They come from many places, many life situations. They have different interests and skill sets. They do not all learn the same way. They do not all like the same food or watch the same television shows or play the same video games. They are not all on Facebook and they do not all tweet. Socio-economic situations impact young lives. And ethnic background can be a significant factor.

> As we build our youth ministry, we need to take into consideration the many contexts in which a young person may find themselves, some of which may not be all that healthy. They live and work and have their being in multiple arenas. Schools, families, neighborhoods, work, gyms, amusement parks, malls, church – these are all places that shape who young people are, sometimes not in particularly healthy ways.

> Youth are also known to compartmentalize their lives. So they say, “This is my spiritual life and this is how I act in church. This is how I act at work. This is how I act at school. I would never do that at church. I would never be accepted at school if I acted like I was at church.” One challenge youth ministry faces is helping young people take a more holistic look at their lives and act consistent with their faith.

- **Youth ministry understands that the lifecycle called “adolescence” has lengthened over the years and today includes young people in 5th and 6th grades through young adults in their late-20’s and even early-30’s.**

> It is generally accepted that adolescence starts with puberty, a life stage that has grown younger and younger over the last 50 years. We have divided youth into junior and senior high for years.

> Some identify very early adolescence (5th/6th grades) as the perfect age for nurturing faith for the long term. Children have no trouble believing in a God who can do all things and connecting to the mysteries of faith. Early first communion and rethinking the confirmation process are issues to consider when it comes to youth ministry.

> But the concept of adolescence is also now extended. There is “post-high school,” classifying those youth who go off to college, military or career. There is now the “emerging adult” phase of life (also called “late adolescence”), counting the mid-20’s to early 30’s, some married and some with children. These are young adults who are sometimes pursuing additional post-graduate education, often living with their parents or receiving their financial support, and insecure in their career track (if they are on a career track at all).

> Big Question: How does the church reach out to the emerging adult, especially considering some of their attitudes to organized religion that we will relate later?

- **Youth ministry is aware of the culture young people live through every day.**

- > There is a youth culture. It is packed with all kinds of “cultural” things. Music (this one is consistently at the top of the youth culture list), social media, technology, celebrities, “heroes,” fads, fashions, trends and the like. The youth culture always seems to be changing and yet it does not. Sometimes it makes an adult extremely uncomfortable. Sometimes not so much.
- > Thirty years ago, trends developed over 18 to 24 months, usually starting on the east or west coast and methodically making their way to the Midwest. Now trends are “tweeted” in 24 hours. Trending, that is, watching the fads and fashions which can start anywhere in the country, is something many teens and young adults follow “religiously.” And everybody, often literally around the world, knows when something has gone viral.
- > One of the biggest challenges for Christian youth ministry is the challenge culture, in general, and the youth culture, in particular, puts in front of our young people. Community values and behaviors are changing day by day. Things that used to be totally unacceptable are now the norm. Indeed, if one challenges the new mores of society, they risk ouster, being an outsider, being called intolerant and bigoted.
- > Again, how do we teach God’s truth with His Biblical values?

- **Youth ministry is experiential and involves all the senses.**

- > It is easy to see how sight and sound connect. We read. We listen to people sharing their insights, often in the form of lecture.
- > But what about the other senses and even ways sight and sound connect in different ways. We can teach about the Lord's Supper but also involve youth experientially. Make the bread. Touch the dough. Bake and smell the warm, hot, unleavened bread fresh out of the oven.
- > Listen, but not only to lectures. Listen to music. Listen to the people's faith testimony.
- > Visit the elderly and touch their hands.
- > Expend energy in service, digging gardens, teaching children, painting houses, repairing roofs, feeding the hungry.
- > Martin Luther alludes to this point in his explanation to the First Article of the Apostles Creed. "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses and still preserves them."
- > The best youth ministry happens when the total person is involved and connected. It is another way to say it is holistic.

- **Every youth has the capacity to be creative and no one needs to fail.**

> When I do youth retreats and other events, I almost always include an art project. Every year at our Lutheran Youth Fellowship retreat, we have a project. Really, it is more of a craft and with relative ease, every teen can be successful. It might be a matter of doing a little painting or decorating a piece of wood with provided decorations, e.g. sequins, glitter, feathers, foam pieces, etc. Sometimes we make a bracelet. Nobody fails in creating their craft. One of the most interesting outcomes of the activity is not the “artwork” but the conversation and relationship building that go on around the table where the teens are working.

- **Music is a key component in youth culture and life. It does not define what worship should or should not be.**

> I love to lead teens in singing. One of my favorites is “Power In the Blood,” an old spiritual. We sing it revival style and antiphonally, with the girls taking their parts on the chorus and guys responding. I speak the verse lines and the teens respond with “There is power in the blood! Power in the blood!” It is an active song, filled with love for Jesus and for His community and the most requested song I know. I have never met a group of teens who cannot or will not sing. It takes some warming up and often includes the silliest of songs to begin. Teens find out it is okay to sing and that we are not worried about perfect pitch or four part harmony. I firmly believe everybody can praise God even if they sing flat.

> Worship is about relationships. First, the relationship a young person has with God. In worship, God acts on the worshipper as His Word is read and explained and as His Sacraments assure the worshipper of their place in God’s kingdom as forgiven people of God.

- > In response to the relationship, the worshipper will surely want to “praise and adore Him.” Sometimes, that praise may be an ancient hymn, sometimes a folk ballad, sometimes a Bach cantata, sometimes a praise chorus, always a response of the soul to our great God. There is no one musical form better or more appropriate than another for this praise.
- > I believe there is a reason that St. Paul includes the listing of “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” twice in his letters (Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19). Praise is inclusive of all musical forms, be it singing the scriptures (psalms), traditional style hymnody (hymns), or praise choruses, camp songs and rock anthems (spiritual songs). A teenager can (and will) include many styles in their praise repertoire.
- > Teenagers and worship go hand in hand. I love to lead teens in a 21st century prayer service inspired by the ancient form, Lectio Divina. The service takes place usually in a darkened, candlelit chapel. The teens spend significant, unrushed time reflecting on Scripture and praying for each other. It is quiet and reflective, a time for meditation. In the background, ancient Gregorian chants play.
- > There is no one right worship style. Traditional liturgy has served the church well for hundreds of years and should not be ignored or forgotten. It is important to remember that many youth respond very strongly to liturgical worship. There is a renewal of traditional liturgy in much of the church. But, a youth may love the liturgy and still like “contemporary worship” with rock praise anthems. It is not one or the other. In worship, we respond to the God who lives within us. Ours is not to ever limit how that response comes forth.

- **Youth ministry understands that not every young people learns or thrives in the same way and supports doing its work utilizing the variety of learning styles.**

- > I am not one who learns all that well by a lecture. I need a picture – or even more, I need a hands-on experience to learn. Lectures may, in fact, be the worst way to expect teenagers to learn.
- > These days, what is called “kinesthetic” learning may be the most important learning style. They are actively engaged in the learning process and in learning the process. Another term often used is “hands on.”
- > There is an old proverb that goes something “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime.” “Tell them and they will most likely forget. Show them and they may remember. Involve them and they will understand.”
- > The engagement of body, mind, and spirit is what so often makes serving opportunities so rewarding/successful.

- **Call them by name. It is a positive affirmation to them. Give them permission to call you by name.**

- > Names are very personal things. When you use a person’s name you are affirming them and recognizing who they are and their presence in your life.
- > Using their name recalls their baptism where they were welcomed into Christ’s kingdom.
- > Using our names is something God does to us. In Isaiah 43:1, God says, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name and you are mine.”

FAMILY AND HOME

- **Youth ministry understands the key component that “family” is for the young person and strives to support and enable effective families while recognizing not every youth has a Christian family environment.**

- > Growing up in the 1950’s, the perception of family life in the media was pretty cozy. If you want to know what it was like check out old TV shows like “Leave It to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best.” While those shows could be critiqued for presenting a perfect and even unrealistic family life, it is also true that, back then, families stayed together at a much higher rate than today. Even when there was stress in the marriage, mom and dad were more inclined to stay together for the sake of the kids. Life for kids was often carefree and “safe.” I could ride my bike the five miles from my home to the public swimming pool and be safe. The most I needed to do was chain my bike to the bike rack (not that anyone would want my bike anyway).
- > All significant studies of youth note that young people take their cues from the folks who raise them. They adopt their parent’s values. They adopt their parent’s faith or lack thereof. Like Christian Smith, Director of the National Study of Youth and Religion, writes, “You get what you are” when it comes to faith.
- > Youth ministry needs to look at ways it can be of support to parents and families and ways to encourage them as they raise their children. What can our churches do to support parents? How do the “elders of the village” relate to the next generation of parents?

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

When I was growing up, everybody at church knew me not because I was so special but because I was a part of the church family. The same could be said about most of the kids at church. “It’s the Dittmer kid.” “It’s the Meyer kid.” “Did you see that Gilbert kid?” “What about that Schmidt kid?”

In my memory, there was a strong adult connection for me from the Lutheran school teachers, from the church organist, from my pastor (who early on thought I might be a candidate for becoming a pastor), from my Scoutmasters, from a very old couple, from a man who worked for Hallmark cards, from the school lunch cooks, my kindergarten principal, my piano teacher, the school bus driver, the vicars and DCEs. And there were the parents of my friends and the members of my parent’s card club. It was quite a network of support and love, really. To me, one amazing thing about these people is that I can say their names. I remember what they looked like. And such was the norm for nearly every child in the congregation. We were loved and valued and we knew it.

- **In the church, young people know that they are accepted. Confession, absolution and unconditional love are hallmarks of Christian Community. The best youth ministry is congregation-based, providing a “village” to care for the young.**

- > The church provides a great support mechanism for young people to understand their value.
- > A congregation is made up of God’s people of all ages with a range of skills, abilities and interests, making it a rich trove of resources to a young person – or any person for that matter. The community of faith helps us know we are connected and

accepted. We are not alone. We can ask our questions. We know our sins are forgiven.

> We know we are a part of a whole.

- **For better or for worse, the “institution” of the church does not resonate with many young people.**

> This is a hard one for people who love their church.

> Dan Kimball notes in his book, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, that Jesus is not the issue when it comes to youth disconnecting from church. Along with other observers of American Christianity, he cites these six common perceptions of young adults today:

- The church is an organized religion with a political agenda
- The church is judgmental and negative
- The church is dominated by males and oppresses females
- The church is homophobic
- The church arrogantly claims all other religions are wrong
- The church is full of fundamentalists who take the whole Bible literally.

> Others note that science and evolution trump creationism in today's youth world. They say neither society nor church has any right to impose its values and morals on the population; those are determined by each individual for themselves.

> For those who value the institution, its legacy, traditions, liturgy, history and heritage, these are challenging realities whether one agrees with the observations or not. It is hard

to get past people's perceptions and lots of young adults perceive that the church is prejudiced and un-accepting.

> Youth ministry sees and accepts the challenge to welcome and encourage people regardless of their biases.

- **Young people love to worship.**

> I have never met a group of young people who did not love to worship. Worship is where God comes to us in Word and Sacrament, offers forgiveness of sin, provides encouragement through His Word and nourishes and nurtures us in the sacraments. That is why we call it "Divine Service," God's work in worship.

> Worship has taken many forms and, frankly, no one form is prescribed in God's Word. Baby Boomers, born 1946-1964, have made their case for so-called "contemporary worship" since the 60's. That style of worship may be identified by its inclusion of praise bands, praise choruses, guitars and drums. Boomers have and will most likely carry their penchant for contemporary worship to their graves. They are not likely to return to a more traditional liturgy in great masses.

> However, Boomers are not correct in their assumption that the only way to reach young people is through contemporary worship. That is a false assumption. Many young people like "contemporary," but many, maybe even most, appreciate a return to traditional liturgy.

> The return of young people to liturgical forms says a lot about their ephemeral culture. Their trends, fads and fashions are incredibly short lived. The traditional liturgy provides young people with something solid, something lasting, something that has served the church well for literally hundreds of years.

Liturgy says consistency, foundation, and something you can trust.

> However, care must be taken to not imply that all youth are into liturgy in the same way. Remembering that young people “compartmentalize” their lives, the liturgy fits well into the “religious compartment” or the part they call church. It is what they do in the “Sunday morning” compartment. But, they can just as easily have a “contemporary Christian music” compartment for the ordinary, day to day, just as they may have a “heavy metal” compartment, a “part-time job” compartment (where they are forced to listen to elevator music), etc. In other words, the liturgy is not the last word but Boomers better not write it off if they want to reach young people – especially when it comes to their “church compartment.”

> Young people’s interest in liturgy does provide a great opportunity for the church to teach its heritage and traditions in ways we have not had for years.

• **Youth ministry understands that young people are fully a part of the body of Christ; not the future of the church but, certainly, the church’s future. God’s church is “intergenerational.” No generation is more “church” than another.**

> Young people are called by the Holy Spirit to full membership in the community of faith and challenged to full participation in the life and ministry of Christ and His church. It happens at baptism.

> Youth ministry challenges young people to take a role in shaping the church’s mission to the world. Youth ministry is a part of and not apart from the congregation’s whole life. Too many times, Youth ministry has been shuttled off to the “youth

room” or church basement. Youth pretty much do their own thing. The exception is fundraising. Adults are pretty much willing to support the efforts to get the kids off to a servant event or youth gathering.

- > The church needs to rediscover the intergenerational nature of God’s church. God did not come up with the idea of children’s church or youth group. God came up with the idea of a total community of faith. Young people can be fully a part of that community. There really is no magic age to be a congregational trustee or member of the altar guild.
- > Chap Clark and Kara Powell in their Sticky Faith research through the Fuller Youth Institute note that youth ministry takes a 5/1 ratio. That used to mean one adult for every five youth. These days it means five adults for every one youth.
- > The idea is not so much that every youth has five counselors but rather that there are five people in the congregation who know the name of “their youth” and know a little about their life, their family, and their interests. Members recognize youth by name when they meet both in the church and outside the church. They pray for their youth. They offer encouragement and acknowledgement.
- > The church is intergenerational by nature. It is made up of infants, children, youth, young adults, adults and older adults. They worship together. They work together. They fellowship together.
 - For a great analysis of this truth, a new book by Christine Lawton Ross and Holly Catterton Allen titled ***Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship***. (Published November 2012 by InterVarsity Press.)

- **Youth ministry is about relationships – about caring for children, youth and young adults**

- > Everybody, young and old, wants and needs to know they are love, cared for and appreciated. The greatest love is certainly the love of God, shown so clearly in Jesus Christ. God the Father gave His son over to death on a cross so that we know forgiveness and know hope for this life and in the eternal future. This is love – God so loved us that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)
- > God then gives us to each other to love one another – whether in the faith community or outside it. Relationships are about caring for the people God has put in our lives. Sometimes they live in our houses; sometimes in our neighborhoods; sometimes around the world.
- > God loves and empowers us to love others.
- > In these relationships, we listen to each other. We pray with each other. We embrace and offer encouragement. Sometimes we may have some advice to offer. But, just as often, sometimes we are silent together. We hold each other’s hands. And sometimes, our relationship is filled with joyful exuberance. This is the way God relates to us and how we are privileged to relate to each other.
- > No one should be alone – and God models that in Christ as He relates to us. He also puts us in relationships so everybody, young and old, is not alone.

- **Youth ministry is about congregational stewardship of the children, youth and young adults God has blessed it with through baptism and others affiliated through family and friends.**

> Congregations take care of their children and youth and share the faith with them. That's the message of Deut. 6:4-9.

□ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (ESV)

> When I read those words from Deuteronomy, I see God speaking to all Israel, all His people, and He tells them to train their children in the faith. God does not want our children and youth to go to waste. He wants us to take care of them. He puts families in congregations to, again, care for and support each other. This is another pitch for the intergenerational nature of the church. One great challenge for the church is to support moms and dads in their roles, crucial at a time in our society when family life is deteriorating.

> The National Study of Youth and Religion notes that young people who have the support of significant adults will generally do better in life and especially in faith.

- **Youth ministry recognizes and celebrates the diversity of people and culture represented in schools, churches, neighborhoods and marketplace and strives to be inclusive of these.**

- > The day of a homogeneous congregational culture (e.g. German) is long past - something many understand but still do not act like it is true. Lutherans used to be communities of German and Northern European peoples. No longer.
- > Our nation is a melting pot of all kinds of people from all kinds of places. The people populate our neighborhoods and their children take their place in our schools. The world of our children and teenagers is a multi-cultural world. Often when they look at our churches, they do not see their world reflected in their church's membership.
- > How we reach this multi-cultural, ethnically diverse world with the Gospel is one of the great challenges ahead. If these people are not welcome in our church communities than our young people will most likely want nothing to do with the church.

- **Youth ministry creates a context in which adults can affirm and encourage young people in the living and confession of their faith.**

- > The best ministry puts people together. It connects them – to Jesus and to each other. It creates an environment where people relate to each other and know they are all a part of a greater whole. Adults need not feel reluctant to care about children and youth and children and youth need not fear the care of adults.
- > All pray for each other, know each other by name, play, pray and celebrate with each other.

VOCATION, MERCY, AND SERVANTHOOD

- **Youth ministry enables young people to be able to serve in meaningful ways in the church and in the world.**

> Teenagers want to know they can make a difference in the world and they do not mind getting a little dirty in the process. They do not just want to be involved in busy work but they want to know that what they are doing is valuable and helpful. They like to help people. Youth ministry can provide teens the opportunities to make the difference they desire.

- **Youth ministry recognizes that all teens possess gifts, talents and abilities and strives to help them use their gifts in meaningful ways in church and community.**

> Youth ministry recognizes, affirms and celebrates the gifts teens have and provides opportunities for them to be “presented” in the church community.

> Energy is a hallmark of young people. Youth ministry attempts to effectively tap into that energy.

THERE IS NO ONE WAY TO DO YOUTH MINISTRY

- **There is not a perfect model for doing youth ministry that will work in every setting. There is, rather, a variety of styles, options and choices. You may find something works well for awhile, and then something else works better. The key is to stay flexible and meet the needs of the youth community, their families and the congregation.**

- **Styles, options and choices include but are not limited to...**
 - > One on one . . . spending time with a young person, showing that you care about their lives, building a relationship. I had a pastor friend who made it a priority to visit his in-state, college kids on campus at least once a year. He made time on his calendar to make sure they knew they were not forgotten back at church.

 - > Nurture opportunities . . . Bible classes, discussion groups, small group, field trips, spontaneous rap sessions.

 - > Peer ministry . . . youth caring for the well-being of their friends and fellow teens.

 - > Needs and experience . . . can work youth to adult or adult to youth, it is about matching the needs of one person (e.g. learning to fish) with the experience of another (e.g. an expert fisherman). And it is not always the adult with the experience. A teenager is often the best teacher when it comes to technology and social media.

 - > Interest groups . . . organized around something people like to do. Could be a youth choir. I once knew a church that had an amazing youth choir that could sing and dance with the best of them. They had youth who loved to sing and play

instruments. They lead worship and performed concerts. The church maintained that group about five years as the “interest group” worked their way through high school. However, as they graduated, the interest in the group waned. Interest groups are often “terminal.” They end when the interest ends and that is okay. A key point, though, is that the church provided the space for their interest.

- > Service ministry . . . taking the opportunity to meet a need, giving love as Christ loves us, making a difference in the lives of the people they help.
- > Single events . . . not every teen can attend every meeting or outing a church may offer. Single events offer the opportunity to connect with a specific event, short term, like a youth gathering, retreat, amusement park, etc.
- > Youth group . . . the youth ministry default where the teens of a congregation gather for a wide range of activities. They meet regularly and usually have some sort of structure. Youth group is the way a lot of youth ministry happens. The group may be the catalyst for single events, interest groups, and service to which other youth connect.
- > Youth on church boards and committees . . . helps youth understand what it takes to run a church and maintain its programs and ministries. Think youth trustees and Sunday school teachers. It is where youth learn leadership skills in a practical, hands-on way.
- > Sports programs . . . the church has a gym, for example, and they open it for youth to use, providing a safe environment and church connection. Devotions at the end of the night, please. (Or better yet, at the beginning as a prereq before

games begin.)

- > Ministry of place . . . church provides a safe harbor and retreat from the world's pressures. Church provides a place to hang out, be with friends, and be safe. This bullet also includes
- > worship opportunities. It is where a teen might say, "That is the place where I worship."

- > Family ministry . . . youth ministry remembers and supports family as the most important connection in the lives of children and teens.

- > Keeping in touch . . . sometimes you may see little of a youth in church but do not write them off. Keeping in touch means making sure they get the youth mailings, emails, Facebook messages, birthday cards, invitations, and care packages when they are off at college. It is acknowledging that you know them and call them by name at the mall, football game, or Sunday morning – wherever you run into them. Taking the time to keep in touch could be significant when there are stressors in their lives.

- > There are probably many others. The point is, keep connected. Show them you care whether at a formal training or an informal pizza party. These are the youth God gives us. The challenge is to be good stewards of them.

FINALLY . . .

- **Youth ministry is passionate about young people and enables their own passions . . . to truly live for something worth dying for.**

> Joy is a hallmark of effective youth ministry as young people celebrate that they are fully a part of the body of Christ.

I would never have thought that God would have given me the kind of ministry that he did. But He did and I am truly thankful. Thankful for all the young people I have gotten to know over the years. Perhaps it is kind of silly to say but I feel like I have known most of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod since they were 15. That is what happens after 40 years. I have worked with three generations, the last of the Boomer youth, the Gen X'ers and the current Millennials. And I look forward to the next generation just about to enter high school.

I have been given the privilege of rejoicing with them in groups of 4 or 5 and in masses of 35,000. Together, ministry includes working, praying, worshipping, and playing alongside of them. We have sung some of the great anthems of the church and some of the silliest camp songs you could imagine. I have seen amazing God-given talent. I have seen creativity and energy. We have studied God's Word and celebrated the Sacrament.

Most importantly, we have celebrated the fact that God has made us His own in Water and Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. I count it a singular blessing to say, "We Are Brothers and Sisters in Christ."

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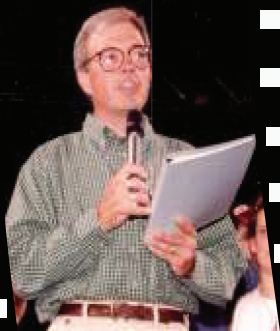
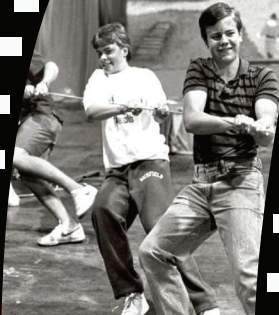
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