

VESTRY PAPERS



EPISCOPAL
CHURCH FOUNDATION
Learn. Lead. Give.

To inspire, affirm and inform Episcopal leaders in their work

For youth, it's all about relationships

by Stefan Jagoe

Six years ago, when I took on the position of Youth Minister at Grace Episcopal Church, I didn't have the slightest idea of where to begin. And those nights when two or three kids showed up when I had worked for days on programs that require at least eight or ten kids to be effective took their toll on me, quickly.

I became frustrated with myself, the church, and my girlfriend for talking me into taking the job — and those lazy, indifferent parents. And so I quit. Several times a week. But, thank God, I never told the rector of my quitting, so I was back at it the next week.

Since then, I have learned some invaluable lessons:

Lesson one: It doesn't have to always be all about God.

Not always. Sometimes, just bringing the kids together to hang out can be a good thing. It still keeps them connected with the church, after all. I wouldn't recommend activities that are in direct opposition with our religious principles, obviously — but the

lock-in doesn't have to be about evangelizing — it can serve as a great way for kids to get to know each other AND their friends. Building community is the first step.

A couple years ago, while attending a workshop, I was given an assignment: to conduct a survey of kids regarding their top reasons for coming to youth groups. While learning about God and studying the Bible did make the list, the top reason most often given was that they came to hang out with their friends. And that's just fine. You can't build the kingdom without subjects! While they're hanging out, we can sneak up on 'em with the Gospel, and they'll be none the wiser.

Lesson two: It's all about relationships.

I began to interact with kids on a more personal level outside of the Grace Church youth group — opening up to them in the hallway before and after church — asking about their lives, their interests, and sharing details about myself (being a retired police

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*This Issue:
Youth*

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They will probably look different. Or act awkward. Or be rude. Or maybe even not show up. Whatever the reality, the youth of the church pose special challenges — and extraordinary blessings — for our congregations, large and small. Here we explore theological realities and practical advice for entering into conversation and sustaining relationships with one of the church's most valuable assets — our youth.

*Inside:
The Spiritual Life
of Teenagers*





Religious arts are making a phenomenal comeback in youth activities for Episcopal congregations. Theater for emerging adolescents and older teens is especially popular, given there are many ways to serve: writing, acting, set-building, etc.

*Next Issue:
The WorkShop,
San Antonio, Texas.*

The spiritual life of teenagers

by Sharon Pearson

Would you consider the youth programs in your congregation “spiritual?” Often a Sunday morning class or forum is offered to middle or high school students emphasizing learning about the Bible, God and beliefs with a little mix of how to apply it to one’s daily life.

Traditionally, most church youth ministries have centered around the “youth group” model of activities, games and pizza that seek to entertain the current values of the



youth culture. According to research from Meier, Ratcliff & Rowe (1995), teenagers see through that façade and thus the churches that are most likely to keep their teens into adulthood are those that stand against the general culture.

Fitting into the world

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a noted sociologist, believes that as young adolescents grow, they will, consciously and unconsciously, begin searching for opportunities for “awakening.” They’ll feel an inner yearning, a “call.” A young person may hear the “call” during a time of solitude, perhaps laying in bed at night and wonder, with great intensity and anxiety, about how he will fit into the world.

“The universe is so big and I am so small — what does all this mean? How do I fit into this world? What will I do when I grow up? Who am I?”

With the increase of pilgrimages, mission trips, contemplative prayer, labyrinth walks, candles, icons and Taizè worship, leaders are now realizing that the experiential aspects of faith, often termed “spirituality,” is at the heart of ministry with youth. This is in part because it meets young people where they are: searching for an identity while yearning to make a difference in the world and learning to turn from personal self-centeredness toward greater communion with God.

Less likely to be in trouble

Young people who say spirituality is very important to them are also less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. Kenda Creasy Dean and others, in their extensive study about youth and religion, challenge the assumption that youth prefer something new and postmodern.

The research reminds us that there are many youth in (or around the edges of) our congregations and these are the youth looking to us as their spiritual mentors. For example, “We were astounded by the realization that for many teens we interviewed, it seemed as if our interview was the first time any adult had ever asked them what they believed.”

Engage them in conversation

Spirituality emphasizes awe, wonder and other experiences that are beyond the mundane and connect the individual to something transcendent, of ultimate importance. With many teens (as well as adults), spirituality can include experiences with God, but it can also include awe and wonder in day to day life as well. Youth ARE spiritual beings; we just need to engage them in the conversation.

Sharon Ely Pearson is a vestry member of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Wilton, Connecticut, where her parish partners with Wilton Presbyterian Church in its youth ministry program. She is also the Christian Formation Specialist for Church Publishing Incorporated. Previously, she was Children's Ministries & Christian Education Coordinator for the Diocese of Connecticut.

For youth, it's all about relationships

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officer, I found that it was my cop stories that did the trick). All but the most resistant cases began to open up and to see me as an individual — not just the youth leader.

These days, technology is the way to go. Not a day goes by in which I don't chat with at least one of my EYC kids on Windows Live Messenger. At least two to three times a week I get a Facebook Message or a note on

Here we try to listen for the voice of God in nontraditional places.

the “wall” of my Facebook page, or a call or text message on my cell phone. And kids will type things that they would never take the time or have the courage to talk face-to-face.

have experienced difficulty in holding the interest of our senior high group. I suppose we could theorize forever as to why this is true, so I won't head down that road right now. But suffice it to say that I finally figured out that maybe the Senior High felt that Sunday morning was enough “church” for one day. And besides, the youth room at Grace has all the standard youth room stuff — air hockey, ping-pong table, foosball table — none of which seem to readily appeal to senior high youth, at least not those of Grace Episcopal.

So we tried meeting somewhere else, off the church campus, and away from the games in the youth room. I picked Joe Muggs Café, a small restaurant found in many Books-a-Million stores. I had noticed kids of similar age hanging around the restaurant's reading space — what if we gathered there and talked



Just last week, one of the girls in the junior high group sent me a Facebook message that asked me to help her find ways to come closer to God, saying she wanted to try her hardest to help it happen. I was so excited with her inquiry that I hardly knew where to begin in answering!

Lesson three: Take it outside.

Like so many youth leaders these days, I

about issues pertaining to theology and morality and the like? The first night I had seven kids, a phenomenal number for senior high, the next meeting, nine.

Lesson Four: Be creative.

This will nearly always ensure that you will fail from time to time, but trial and error have been my two best friends in youth

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The “time crunch” issue is especially hard on youth these days, as they juggle schedules of homework, sports and extracurricular activities. This seems to be all the more reason for parents to help make church a priority. See how one Canadian journalist deals with the problem by going to www.episcopalfoundation.org and clicking on the Vestry Papers link.



Like adults, youth are most likely to come to church when they have an assignment in the Sunday service. Senior warden Lisa Holmberg from St. Stephen's, Edina, Minnesota, takes it one step further with her own teenagers: "I don't ask. I just sign them up!" Sounds good to us.

New ways of reaching youth

by Matthew Moretz

As we shape and direct the mission of our parishes, young people should be at the front of our agendas. If this hasn't been the case for your vestry, such a shift will require new ways of thinking about church life. It will certainly demand new ways of allocating resources. But perhaps you are already blessed by a parish that recognizes ministry with adolescent youth is vital to a healthy community of faith.

How best to be supportive of young people in parish life? It is difficult to know where to begin. This uncertainty may be exacerbated by a sense of profound distance between the adults and the youth in a parish. Intentional work is the key here — beginning with the leaders of the parish, the vestry. Here are

I believe that this also extends to speaking regularly with the youth of the parish. This may prove awkward, given the developing social skills of the young. But a brief word or two, even if the conversation goes nowhere, contributes toward engaging our youth in the life of the parish. And don't try to be someone you aren't. A little authenticity goes a long way.

Are the youth in prominent worship roles?

Your parish should set aside age-appropriate programming for its young people. Supporting this avenue of ministry is essential. But it would be unfortunate if this led to a profound division between the youth



Above, the Rev. Matthew Moretz recording an episode of "Father Matthew Presents." To date, more than 40 three-minute videos have taken viewers on lighthearted and humorous tours through the life, practice, and teaching of the Episcopal Church. The series is distributed via the website "YouTube," where one may post and share video content for free. As a result of this new communications medium, "Father Matthew Presents" has been viewed more than 200,000 times. For full story, see www.ccrye.org or www.youtube.com/fathermatthew.

some questions worth considering in your efforts to cultivate a parish that is hospitable to young people:

Are you talking to the youth of your parish?

As a general rule, it is important for vestry members to be gregarious at church gatherings. They should be, as a rule, vigilant in welcoming newcomers and keeping an ear to the concerns of regular members.

and the rest of the parish. The danger lies in the so-called "ghettoizing" of youth into a separate and distinct sphere of church life. Encouraging young people to take visible leadership roles in regular worship is one antidote against such a division.

Young people are able to serve not only as acolytes, but also as ushers, lay readers, and Eucharistic ministers. Some parishes have

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been known to hold an annual “Youth Sunday” when all lay roles (even preaching) is the youth’s responsibility. However youth participation in common worship is configured, be sure that invitations are being extended.

Are enough parish resources devoted to the youth?

Give your budget line item for youth a cursory comparison against other line items. How does your church’s youth budget compare to other aspects of church life, such as music or groundskeeping? There is no

right answer to this question. And a larger budget does not necessarily equal greater quality. But it always helps to consider the proportion of resources given to a certain ministry in relationship to the mission of the church. If you are focusing on youth in your parish, does your budget reflect this?

And be sure to pray for the young people of your parish, both individually and as a gathered vestry. God provides opportunities that are hardly predictable, and your prayers serve to keep you mindful of new occasions for support that may come your way.

Editor’s Note

In preparing this issue, we put out a nationwide call to those working with youth: clergy, youth ministers, vestry members, etc. And the response was phenomenal. People care about youth. They care deeply.

However, there is one substantial area in which vestries and others could do more — and that is to help talented youth consider the ordained ministry as a vocation.

There is nothing wrong with lay careers; they should be affirmed. But in the Episcopal Church, despite outstanding national efforts by various groups, the clergy are simply growing older. *And older.* The average age of seminarians is 44, and has remained there for several years. Most people are still ordained between ages 45 and 55. While

older people are capable of reaching out to youth and most do, younger clergy are clearly needed.

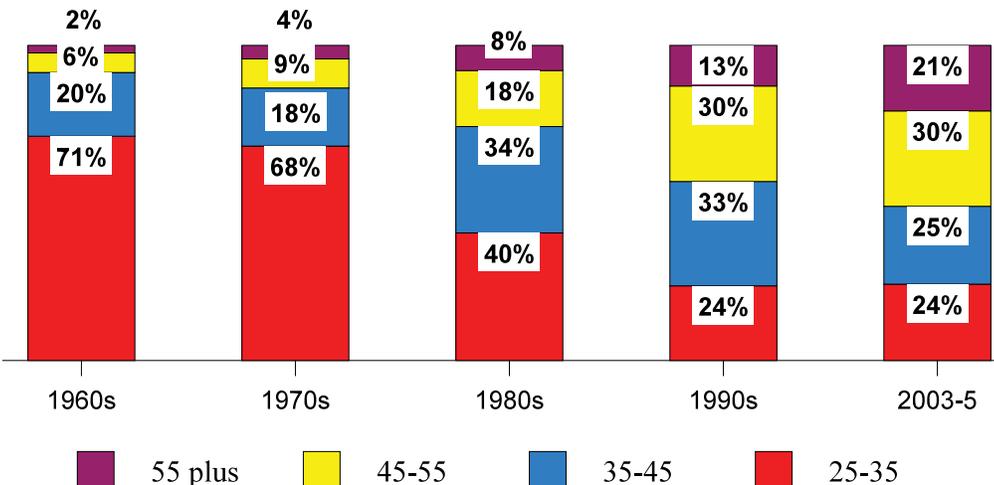
How about something like this: “You have a lot going for you, and the church could really use your skills. Have you ever thought about a vocation in the church?” or “I know it may be a scary thought, but you would make a good parish priest.” Or seminary professor. Or youth group leader.

Ordained ministry is tough. But the rewards of serving thirty or forty years can be phenomenal, for both the individual and the Church.

Think about it. And let’s start talking to our kids about a life of ministry in the Vineyard.

Lindsay Hardin Freeman

Ordinations of the Priesthood by Age Group, 2003 through 2005



Over the last forty years, the age of those being ordained has become significantly older. Vestries have an opportunity to help turn that trend around.



PLSE (the Pastoral Leadership Search Effort), a program of the Episcopal Church, seeks to identify young persons, ages 16-30, who might have the skills and interest to pursue an active role as lay or ordained leaders in the Church. Conversations, events and resources are available. For more information, see www.episcopalchurch.org/plse.



What parent doesn't like to see their child reading the Bible? Try this: split up a Sunday reading between three or four teens. Ask them to read it from the lectern or spread them out in different parts of the congregation. Call it Gospel Reader's Theater. Adults will pay attention as well as the kids.

Statistically speaking...

by Sharon Ely Pearson

Some 50 percent of all Protestant teens attend church weekly, participate in Sunday school or in a religious youth group, pray and attend a religious summer camp or retreat, though less than one-third read the Bible each week. This also means, however, that substantial numbers of Protestant teens are not actively participating in their religious traditions.

- 60 percent of Protestant teens say they pray alone a few times a week or more, 47 percent of Protestant teens report praying with their parents in the last year and 32 percent of Protestants reading the Bible at least once a week.
- Protestant teens who regularly attend church are more likely to pray and read



Most Protestant teens are at least somewhat religious in their beliefs. The majority of Protestant teens appear to hold to the most basic Christian beliefs:

- 90 percent say they believe in God.
- 44 percent percent say they feel very or extremely close to God, meaning that more than half of Protestant teens do not feel this close to God.
- Almost 75 percent of Protestant teens report that God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today.
- The majority of Protestant teens say they believe in the afterlife, angels and other religious doctrines.
- Regularly attending Protestant teens are especially likely to report believing in God, the afterlife, angels, demons, miracles and judgment day.

the Bible than are teens who attend sporadically or do not attend at all.

- Religious faith plays an important role in the lives of the majority of Protestant teenagers. 60 percent of Protestant teens say faith is very or extremely important in shaping how they live their daily lives.
- 35 percent of Episcopalian teens who attend church more than a few times a year say that most or all adults in their congregations are hypocrites while only 2 percent of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America teens and none of the Presbyterian Church (USA) teens in the NSYR sample agree that most or all adults in their congregations are hypocrites.

Phil Schwadel & Christian Smith, Portraits of Protestant Teens: A Report on Teenagers in Major U.S. Denominations, A report by the National Study of Youth and Religion, 2005.

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ministry programming. Here we try to listen for the voice of God in nontraditional places. For me, it began with the use of episodes of *The Simpsons*. Obviously, one must exercise discretion in choosing the episodes — the writers are after all, comedy writers, not Sunday School teachers. But one thing the show has done consistently is accurately portray Americans' views of religion. Despite the fact that the evidence frequently says otherwise, most Americans see religion as playing some part in their lives. Mark Pinsky, author of *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* (2001) notes that 69 percent of the episodes contain a reference to religion and 11 percent focus on a religious issue.

We have also tried to expand this creativity into the area of service — working with animals in shelters, picking up trash on the highway. Needless to say, the kids have loved their time with the animals, and while picking up trash is not quite as exciting, they do understand that it is part of being good stewards of God's creation.

Filling in the cracks

A couple of years ago, I had a conversation with the Rev. Jay Magness, former Canon to the Ordinary for the Diocese of Kentucky.

We talked about the challenges of doing effective youth ministry in view of all the other activities that place a demand upon the time of kids of today, from soccer to scouting and everything in between. He said something that has stuck with me — that it seems in youth ministry today we are “filling in the cracks” of the schedules of our kids. And he was right.

Many youth participate in EYC activities only when there is nothing else to fill that time slot. At first that was rather disheartening, but I have come to see our “filling in the cracks” in much the same way as mortar fills in the cracks between bricks. Were it not for the mortar filling in, the bricks would not a building make. So I have begun to see our challenge as being the best “mortar” we can be — always opting for quality over quantity.

Stefan Jagoe is the Youth Minister at Grace Episcopal Church in Paducah, Kentucky, a town of some 27,000 people, “the hub of far western Kentucky.” Grace Episcopal has some 500 members on the books, representing about 200 households.



An idea that seems to work well: Christ Church, Short Hills, New Jersey, gives awards to two teens annually, one male and one female, affirming them for years of such activities as teaching Sunday School and helping with outreach.

Vestries can support the spirituality of our youth by:

- Encouraging adults to become spiritual mentors to teens.
- Giving serious attention to the spiritual lives of preadolescents and their families so that in the teen years the youth culture will be marginal while living for Christ will be primary.
- Supporting youth ministry that is grounded in Christian practice and offering youth the tools and opportunities they need to practice the Christian life.
- Physically recognizing teens as equal partners by incorporating their unique gifts and abilities through being seen, heard and welcomed in worship.
- Being in conversation with youth — ask them about their day, their interests, their jobs and activities.

by Sharon Ely Pearson



ECF's Mission

To strengthen the leadership and financial capabilities of Episcopal congregations, dioceses and related organizations to pursue their mission and ministry.



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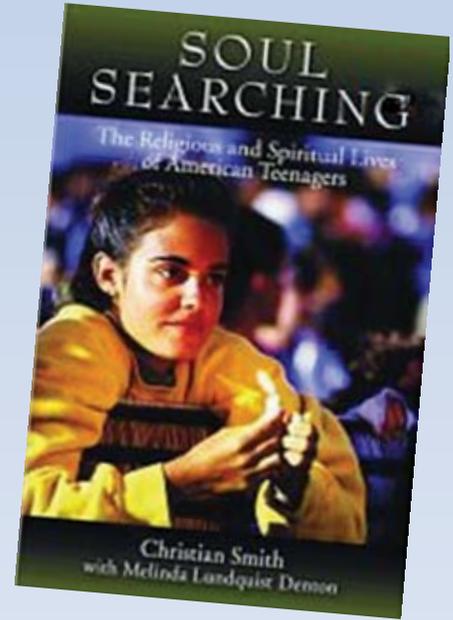
Reader's Corner

Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton.

What do teenagers really think about God? Do they believe in Jesus? Does church make a difference to them? Do they pray?

In its first major study, the National Study of Youth and Religion has published its findings in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton (Oxford University Press, 2005). The book describes what "seems to be a major transformation of faith in the US," away from old traditions toward a new journey the authors deem "moralistic therapeutic deism."

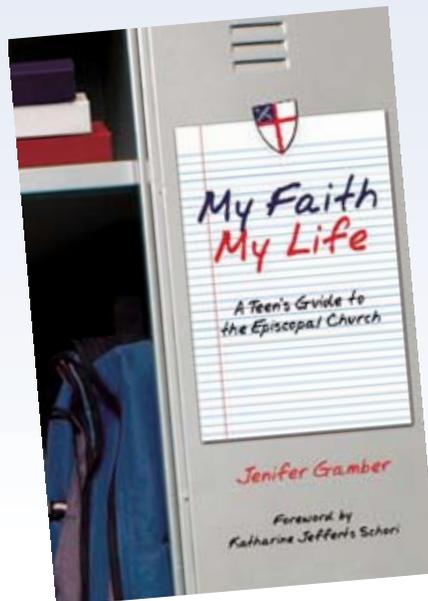
Full of relevant and sometimes surprising findings, the book reports that teenagers are more influenced by the faith of their parents and other adults than was previously thought. Their understanding of classic religious beliefs, however, are poorly developed and "de-prioritized."



An essential for those working with young Episcopalians in the church today.

Oxford University Press

Other Good Picks



My Faith, My Life: A Teen's Guide to the Episcopal Church by Jenifer Gamber.

A clear and concise book for teenagers that spells out where the Episcopal Church stands as well as inviting the reader to develop his/her own faith stance. "The educational principles are sound, the theology clear, and the exercises engaging." Comes with a leader's guide.

Morehouse

Important youth-related websites:

National Study of Youth and Religion
<http://www.youthandreligion.org>

The Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood & Adolescence
<http://www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org>

The Search Institute
<http://www.search-institute.org/congregations>

LeaderResources
<http://www.leaderresources.org>