

NE MN Synod Youth Ministry Update
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Why do we do what we do? And is what we are doing the most effective way to get at what we want? These have been the two questions I have been wrestling with this year as I have been working on a visioning process to develop a new strategic plan for synod youth ministry. Why do we do what we do? Is it the most effective way to get at developing faith in young people? Let me share a short clip with you.

Video clip: Stuck on escalator. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXCuGvsThEw>

Why do you do what you do in youth ministry? Is it getting you where you want to be? Or is what you are doing have you stuck in a system that is no longer working? This clip is funny because the people are stuck in believing that the only way to move between floors is to ride the escalator, and are unwilling or unable to adjust their thinking to their current situation. Escalators are just moving stairs after all. But even when the repair man comes – the expert – even he gets stuck in the system and is unable to get to the point of being able to adjust the system to get the people moving again. Does that sound like your congregation? More often than not, it describes youth ministry in a congregation. We're not broken, but all too often we find ourselves stuck in a system that no longer gets us where we want to be.

The purpose of our synod is to, “nurture a Christ-centered climate conducive to healthy, mission-focused congregations and their ministries throughout the world.” To have healthy, mission-focused congregations is why we do what we do in our synod. So what is the most effective way to get at this? Consider this quote from the research of Kenda Creasy Dean:

- The best way to stimulate the spiritual health in a congregation is to invest in the spiritual growth of young people.
- And the best way to stimulate the spiritual growth of young people is to invest in the spiritual growth of adults.
- The best investment in the faith life of young people is to invest in their parents.

Healthy congregations invest time, money and resources into the spiritual development of young people. We know this – and yet the most current research states that only 8% of youth are actively engaged in the life of the congregation. This says to me that while we may know why we do what we do, our current practices are only effective for 8% of the population.

In Acts 20 we read the story of a young man names Eutychus. Everyone was gathered for worship, and Eutychus showed up. But he was sitting in the back, in a window, and the Apostle Paul was talking on and on and on...to the point that Eutychus fell asleep, and fell out of the window to his death.

What I hear in this story are the youth of today. Kids of all shapes and sizes, personalities and looks. Kids who are seeking, and kids who show up. Kids who believe in God, who want to grow deeper, but are turned off by systems that don't engage young people in meaningful encounters with the living Christ or integrate them into significant

roles to live out their faith. Instead we put them to sleep. And too often we don't even notice that they have fallen out the window. To bring back the 92% of young people who are not engaged in the church means we have to go outside of the current system. We need to think about and practice youth ministry differently.

I don't have all the answers for what this will look like, but here are three areas that I think we need to address in order for us to reach youth like Eutychus:

1. First, we need to make significant strides in adult faith formation. Intentionally steeping our adults in the marks of discipleship so that the language of faith in word and action becomes part of their DNA. Research shows that just as youth reflect the faith of their parents, they also reflect the faith of the congregation. If adults in the congregation don't see faith as an integral part of their life, why should the youth? I am haunted by a conversation I once had with a confirmation student. She was telling me how boring confirmation was, and when I suggested that she speak to her guide or mentor about making the small group time more challenging she replied, "Why bother. He doesn't know any more than I do." Our young people need adults in their lives who are equally engaged on this faith journey, struggling alongside them in their doubts, and growing with them in their wonder of a God whose Word transcends generations and current cultural practices.
2. Second, we need to be intentional in deepening the competency of our adult leaders who work with young people. I love the language of competency because it affirms the truth that we are on a life long journey of learning when it comes to ministry. I thought I was pretty smart when I took this position ten years ago. But the longer I am in this, the more I realize how much I still need to learn and grow. When I think of deepening the competency of those who work with young people I break it down to four areas:
 - a. Deepening our Lutheran understanding of theology so that we can clearly articulate and translate to young people what we believe.
 - b. Deepening our understanding of youth ministry theory. This means understanding why we do what we do and learning the best practices and systems to deliver effective youth ministry programs.
 - c. Deepening our abilities in practical youth ministry skills such as leading Bible studies and using games as teaching tools.
 - d. Deepening our connectedness to each other through networking. There is a great gift in being connected with others who are doing similar work. We learn from each other, are supported by each other, and become more effective when we work together.

I think it's also important as we consider deepening our competency that we broaden our understanding of who are the adults who work with youth. Certainly this includes youth directors and pastors, but it also includes volunteer leaders, Sunday school teachers, mentors and confirmation guides, church councils and committees. Basically anyone who comes in contact with youth.

3. The third area has to do with integrating youth ministry and its leaders into the full life and vision of the congregation. From a program perspective, this

means that every committee and task force in a congregation is a youth ministry committee. The worship committee involves young people in their planning and gives intentional thought to how their ministry reaches the first third of life. The quilting group considers how they might intentionally engage young people in their mission. The adult education committee collaborates with the confirmation leaders to train the mentors and nurture their faith.

From a leadership perspective, this means that the volunteer and paid youth leaders are intentionally involved in the visioning and planning for the whole congregation so that youth ministry programs do not become silos, essentially operating as a separate congregation. And the leaders are nurtured for this role. Pastors I give you this challenge: in this next year, how can you more deeply partner with your youth ministry leaders to discuss theology and to vision with them? Could this mean bringing them to text studies, involving them in your wonderings for the future of your congregation, having coffee once a week to share your faith journeys? For those of you already doing this, I applaud you. You see how these leaders are your colleagues and partners in ministry. For those of you who might begin this challenge, I offer this: Many of our youth ministry leaders have already traveled far on the theological path and you will be surprised how deep the conversation can be. For others, this will be an opportunity to deepen the thinking of your leaders whose ministry encompasses children, youth, parents, and other adult leaders. A significant portion of most congregations.

Youth leaders provide a wide range of ministry. They are asked to lead Bible studies, provide pastoral care to youth and parents, administrate funds, coordinate logistics with few resources, and so much more. How can we not think of them other than colleagues and partners in ministry?

The answer to reaching the 92% of young people who are not engaged in the church is not more programs. The answer lies in tending our mission of translating the Gospel to young people in Word and deed. Remembering why we do what we do, and deepening our competency in order to get at that.

So where has my visioning for synod youth ministry brought me? There is still work to be done on the strategic plan, but here is some of what I am thinking.

I am convinced that the mission of synod youth ministry is to deepen the competency of congregations for effective, Christ-centered youth ministry. The competency areas I am looking at are the ones I have already listed: theology, theory, skills and networking. I believe that we are better when we deepen our competency in each of these areas. Adults grow stronger and deeper. Therefore congregations grow stronger and deeper. And ultimately, where our adults go, our kids go. And vice versa...I have no doubt that as our young people grow stronger and deeper in faith, they will push our adults to go deeper as well.

Practically, this means a subtle shift in how we develop the programs the synod offers, and perhaps which events we offer. While most of our events and trainings already incorporate the competency areas, we will now be even more intentional in how we do that. For example:

- The Synod Journey will now expect adult leaders to attend trainings that will focus on deepening their competency in these areas, and the same training will be open to adult leaders not attending the Synod Journey.
- We have access to nearly 200 adult leaders at every Middle School Gathering. How can we leverage this time together to deepen the competency of these leaders?
- My biggest wondering has been around the leadership development for all youth, not just those who are part of the LYO Board. How do we train youth alongside adult leaders to go back into congregations to practice their leadership skills and grow in faith?

Visioning is the fun part. The reality hits when it comes time for implementation. Later in May I will be meeting with my youth ministry teams to begin to put flesh to this. To aid our conversation, at the end of my talk the pages will be handing out a survey that I ask every voting member to fill out and return either to the page table or return with your evaluations. Plans will certainly evolve as we continue to move forward. What I am committed to is developing a strategic plan that is consistent with the resources, competency and commitment that we have at hand.

Deepening our competency in youth ministry can be a daunting task. The Good News when it feels overwhelming is in the rest of the Eutychus story in Acts. The people did notice that Eutychus was no longer with them. They looked outside their system and found the boy. Paul stopped what he was doing, went to Eutychus, and restored him to the community. Paul went back to preaching, they broke bread, and the people left that place walking alongside Eutychus. They were changed, their system was changed. The passage closes saying that they were greatly comforted. Isn't that the truth. We are whole when we have the entire body of Christ walking together. I pray this year that we may all deepen our competency so that we can walk together more completely as the body of Christ.