

NE MN Synod Youth Ministry Update
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Good evening. Before I begin, I want to acknowledge a healthy trend I have seen developing the last few years at our synod assembly. Last year I noted that there were 3 youth under the age of 20 serving as voting members. This year that number has grown to at least 15. I find this exciting because it is a direct response to the promise we make to these young people at baptism and again when they affirm their baptisms - namely to walk with them on this faith journey and to meaningfully involve them according to their gifts in the work of the church.

At its core, youth ministry is fulfilling the promises we make to young people at baptism.

To:

- Live with them among God's faithful people
- Bring them to the word of God and the holy supper,
- Teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,
- Place in their hands the holy scriptures,
- And nurture them in faith and prayer,

So that (and I often wonder, in the midst of our teaching, if we forget that this is the purpose),

- Your children may learn to trust God,
- Proclaim Christ through word and deed,
- Care for others and the world God made,
- And work for justice and peace.

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? A 5 point plan to develop consequential faith in young people:

- Be mentors (and talk about faith)
- Go to worship (and bring the kids with you)
- Teach the essentials (and know what we believe)
- Read the Bible (and read the Bible with your kids)
- Pray (and pray with your kids)

And yet we have collectively failed to do this in a way that nurtures consequential faith in young people. I intentionally use the word consequential. Studies show that by and large, young people have faith. They believe in God. The problem is – faith doesn't make a difference in their daily lives. It's like socks. Everyone likes socks, they come in handy when your feet are cold. Sometimes they jazz up your outfit. But in this day and age, socks really don't matter since everyone wears flip flops – even in winter – and socks just sit in a drawer until the random day they're needed. Like for gym class. Gym class teaches you that socks are important, and not just for comfort. They keep your foot firmly planted in your shoe, reduce blisters and give you the cushion and support for the work you need to do in sports. But as soon as class is over, kids take off their socks, put their flip flops back on, and walk back to their daily lives.

You may recognize your young people in the sock theory. Does gym class sound a little too much like confirmation, Sunday school, or youth group – where the young people come and try on faith for their required hours, then go back to their normal lives where they spend little time putting into practice what they have been taught about faith during their time at church?

The National Study on Youth and Religion sums up the sock theory as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Yes, the vast majority of young people believe in God, but they have replaced traditional Christian beliefs with a watered down version of faith that looks very little like Christianity. This “creed” believes:

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.” (Soul Searching, 162-163)

This sounds nice. We do want our kids to be happy, and to do good things. But is that life? What happens when their parents divorce? What happens when their best friend commits suicide? What happens when their daily experience is filled with bullying and being called names on Facebook, where thousands of other teens read about it? If MTD is their belief system, what gives them hope when real life happens?

And is this what we truly believe? I don’t know about you, but I want our young people to know Jesus, the God of the universe who is and wants to be very involved in their lives in a personal way. I want our young people to know Jesus as one who calls them to a life of sacrifice for the sake of others, and walks with them on that journey. I want our young people to know that the story of the cross is as important to our faith as the story of the resurrection. The cross does not feel good. It is not a place of happiness. It is not fair. It is intensely personal. God’s work at the cross is what makes the difference. And it doesn’t sound anything like moralistic therapeutic deism.

So that is why I use the word consequential faith. We want young people to have a faith that makes a difference in their daily lives. That informs their decisions, guides their actions...but even more, gives them a Christ lens with which to see themselves and the world. A lens that gives them hope, and sustains them through the hard times. A lens that gives them a purpose beyond themselves. A lens that loves God and loves their neighbor.

Let me bring you back to the promises we make at baptism. What do you notice? I’ll help you out – these promises have much more to do with you than they have to do with the young people who are baptized. So turn to your neighbor and say, this is about you!

What I find most challenging about the National Study of Youth and Religion is that they found that by and large, young people believe what their parents believe. They believe what the adults of the congregation believe. Let that sink in for a moment. If our young people believe in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and they got those beliefs from their parents and other adult faith mentors...that means our adults also have the watered down belief system of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. As Kenda Creasy Dean says in her book, [Almost Christian](#),

“The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and that church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on ‘folks like us’ – which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.”

Ouch. We have some work to do. And that work has very little to do with holding more youth events. Instead, it has everything to do with deepening the faith of adults. Let me say it this way to this room full of pastors and congregational leaders – to develop consequential faith in the lives of our young people, you must be developing consequential faith in the lives of the adults in your congregation.

I want to share with you a significant way in which the synod wants to support you in developing adult leaders this coming year. Last June I was asked by the ELCA Youth Gathering to give leadership to one of the learning days at the 2012 Gathering in New Orleans. The day of Practice Discipleship will help young people more deeply understand, practice, and articulate their faith. But as I have shared this evening, we also know that this doesn't happen without trained and equipped leaders of consequential faith. So in this coming year, there will be multiple training events in every synod across the ELCA to deepen the faith and skills of adult leaders. These trainings will be available to ALL adult leaders, regardless of your participation in the Gathering...the ELCA believes this investment is that important. The trainings will be in a variety of formats and will focus on theology, youth ministry theory and skills – not the Gathering.

- There will be face-to-face trainings that will focus on creating youth ministry events of all types and sizes that are faith formation events.
 - Part I has already been offered in Grand Rapids and Brainerd, and will be offered again Sunday, May 15 in Duluth.
 - Part II will take place in October 2011
 - Part III will take place in Spring 2012.
 - Each of these will also have a component of Gathering details, but these will be given at the end of the training session so you may leave if you are not attending the Gathering.
- There will be 7 online webinars written and taught by Terri Elton, Jeremy Myers and Tiger McLuen. You can either listen to these live, or download later to listen individually or with a team.
- These webinars will also be taught in retreat and workshop settings in our synod throughout the next year. Watch for dates and locations in Youth E-Chat and Online Reflections.

Again, all of these trainings are free. Our hope is that every adult leader – pastors, youth directors, volunteers, mentors, Sunday school teachers...every adult who cares about youth participate. Come as an individual, but even better, come as a team. An individual can learn something. A team can change the culture of the congregation. Pastors and youth directors may know some of the information shared, but here is a chance to be reminded and challenged to grow deeper in your ministry, and to sit by your volunteers and think together how you might implement some of these skills in your congregation.

Our synod has been making an investment in growing adult leaders for years, in particular through the Synod Journey to the ELCA Youth Gathering. I believe I was asked to give leadership to the Practice Discipleship works because of our track record with the Synod Journey. The theme for the 2012 Synod Journey is Mission Possible. The trainings mentioned above will be required for all adult leaders attending the Synod Journey. But our deep hope is that all adult leaders take part. Our mission is to fulfill the promises we made to young people at their baptism. Our mission is to pass on a consequential faith to the young people in our lives. With the help of Christ, this mission is possible.

In closing, I want to share with you a glimpse of what this mission looks like when it has been well tended by adults of consequential faith. In a moment you're going to hear from Maia Dalager, the current president of our Lutheran Youth Organization Board. Maia has been surrounded through her life by parents, adults, a congregation and a synod that intentionally invested in her faith. The result is a young person whose faith makes a difference in her daily life. Maia knows Jesus as a God who is personally involved in her life. Her faith gives her strength and sustains her. She has made sacrifices in her life because of her faith. Maia lives the joy of the resurrection because she wears the lens of Christ at the cross. And so it shouldn't have surprised me this year when Maia gave me one of the most extraordinary gifts I have ever received. In the midst of a busy LYO event, Maia walked up to me and said, "I've been meaning to give this to you." She held out to me a Bible, and placed in my hands the holy scriptures. The baptismal promise, extended back to me.

Consequential faith. It is of the utmost importance that we keep our promise to pass on faith to young people. This is our mission. This is our calling. With Christ it is not only possible, but will undoubtedly develop a consequential faith in our own lives as well.