

NE MN Synod Youth Ministry Update
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Good afternoon. Last week I attended the [Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry](#)¹, a theological conference on youth ministry. There were speakers from around the globe, speaking on the latest research and practices. Elizabeth Drescher, a researcher and professor of religious studies from Santa Clara University in California, gave two lectures on the “nones” - those who claim no religious affiliation. She closed her first lecture with this comment: “The loss of Jesus will be a dangerous memory for the next generation.”

Wow. Could we really be on a path in which Jesus is a forgotten memory for the coming generations? She has good reason to make such a claim. The research is consistent and overwhelming²:

- The big news this year was that the “nones” reached 20% of the population. This means that 1 in 5 Americans claim no religious affiliation. They’re not just going to a different church - they’re not going anywhere. And for those under the age of 30, this number is 1 in 3. Those who claim “none” as their religion has doubled since 1990, and grows by 20% every year.
- For those of you who tuned out when you heard this was the “youth ministry” report, let me pull you back into the conversation. Those numbers are not just about youth and young adults. The nones encompass all ages and the numbers are increasing across all generations.
- For Lutherans, on average, 41% will leave the church. Of that, 13% will become nones, meaning they will no longer consider themselves affiliated with any religion. If you do the math, in 5 years the number who will become “nones” jumps to 30% of those who leave the Lutheran church.

Thankfully I trust that God will continue God’s church, with or without us. But I do fear that without us paying attention to these shifts, there will be far too many living without the knowledge of the life giving hope and love of Christ. And that is what this is about. It’s not about saving the institution of our church, it’s about sharing the transforming love of Christ.

¹ <http://www.ptsem.edu/iym/>

² These statistics are from research presented by Elizabeth Drescher at the Princeton Youth Forum.

As many of you have heard me share before, the good news in the research is that a significant portion of the “nones” believe in God. 68% believe in God. 55% see themselves as spiritual or religious. 40% pray. For the most part, they are not anti-God. The bad news is what they actually believe. We also know from research that their faith is a [watered down version of Christianity](#) that does not have an impact on their daily life³.

So the question becomes, how do we shape ministry around helping people to learn the practice of being Christian, of living a vital faith? As we saw in the [video](#) this morning⁴, our culture has changed, and we need to pay attention to that. We no longer have a culture that supports and passes on the Christian faith. This impacts everyone, but has a particular impact on our young people. The highest point at which people become nones is in their youth and young adult years. This is why it is so critical that we pay particular attention to this age group. As speaker Nick Shephard said at the conference last week, “If youth ministry is not part of the solution then youth ministry is part of the problem. Are the concrete practices and conceptual framework that we have up to the task of faith formation?” Let me say that again: are the concrete practices (what we do) and conceptual framework (how we do that) up to the challenge of nurturing a faith that makes a difference in the lives of our young people in our current culture? Bowling parties are not enough to pass on faith. We need to focus on practices that center young people to experience, grow and BE in faith – with others and on their own.

This is why our synod has emphasized [Practice Discipleship](#)⁵ and the [Discipleship Challenge](#)⁶ this past year. The Discipleship Challenge offers the concrete faith practices youth AND adults need to experience, grow and BE in faith. The faith practices move us from a set of rules to a relationship. They frame our life and let us BE in faith. They help us experience and grow in faith, and give us language to express what we believe. They serve as a compass as we interact with a culture no longer naturally supportive of Christianity, and give us tools with which to live our faith in this world.

³ For more information, see <http://kendadean.com/almost-christian/>

⁴ Did You Know? - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL9Wu2kWwSY>

⁵ Practice Discipleship is an initiative across the ELCA to equip adult leaders in theology, theory and ministry skills using the 7 Faith Practices as a foundation for sharing faith. For more information, visit www.practicediscipleship.org.

⁶ The Discipleship Challenge is a movement in the NE MN Synod to “challenge” congregations to grow in the 7 Faith Practices. For more information, visit www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship.

The Practice Discipleship [workshops](#)⁷ offer a larger frame for ministry. Through the online resources and local trainings offered in our synod, there are a variety of sessions that help leaders in all areas of ministry think more critically about how we do ministry in our settings. Our culture has changed, and we need to adapt how we share the message of the unchanging love of Christ in a world that is changing on a daily basis.

In the overview session for this year's Practice Discipleship series, "Faith Formation in a Missional Age," Terri Elton shares similar statistics to those I shared earlier on the current realities of our church and culture, and concludes with these 3 statements:

1. You are not alone. Look around the room. Every person here is dealing with these realities. We are part of a larger culture and system in which Christianity is no longer the norm.
2. Changing our worship style or Sunday school curriculum is not enough. Rearranging the deck chairs of the Titanic is not going to save the ship.
3. We need to talk about this. Burying our head in the sand and denying that things have fundamentally changed won't help.

And we need to talk about this as an entire church. A summary of the National Study on Youth and Religion could be stated that "you get what you are." We need adults growing in their understanding and practice of faith, so that our young people can grow in their understanding and practice of faith. The Practice Discipleship workshops seek to deepen this conversation. As you return home to develop your mission plans, I encourage you to include these workshops and resources in your plan. Make faith formation for your adults a priority, for the sake of your youth. Please don't simply put the information in the mailbox for the youth director or youth committee. Pastors – your leadership in this is vital. Get this information into the hands of all your leaders. Open doors and encourage their participation. These resources are free and accessible. A [handout](#)⁸ is available on the resource table with more information, but let me highlight a few things:

⁷ The Practice Discipleship workshops are the events held in our synod for the Practice Discipleship Initiative. See www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship, under "Workshops and Events."

⁸ See the 2013 Synod Assembly "Resource Handout" at www.nemnsynod.org, under "Youth" then "Resources, Links and Events."

1. www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship will get you to our synod website for the Discipleship Challenge. On it you will find these big blue buttons that will connect you to the workshops and resources we offer locally in our synod.
2. www.practicediscipleship.org. This is the national website for Practice Discipleship. Here you can download curriculum and videos to train and equip leaders individually or as groups in your congregation.
3. Pastor Chris Manisto from Trinity Lutheran in Princeton is our synod Practice Discipleship coach. She leads a team of pastors and youth directors who offer these workshops in open enrollment events like we have this weekend, and are also available to lead workshops in your congregation or with a group of congregations. Contact Pastor Chris for more information.

In full disclosure, on your behalf I serve in the volunteer position of national Director for Practice Discipleship for the ELCA, along with a rock star team that makes me look really good. My role gives me a bird's eye view of what it means across the ELCA to equip leaders for ministry. Last year over 10,000 adult leaders participated in Practice Discipleship events. That's over 10,000 people talking about ministry and faith. Think about that. 10,000 leaders paddling in the same direction. At this year's ELCA Youth Ministry Network Extravaganza, an annual conference for adults working with youth, I had several people note a change in the conversations in the hallways and workshops. There was less interest in the hottest games and fundraisers, and more conversation around how we shape ministry – including the games and fundraisers - to help young people follow Jesus. It's just an observation, but I feel it happening in our synod as well. Youth ministry is a deeply theological and complex ministry, and deserves adults from the entire church paddling in the same direction.

Like Terri states in her conclusions, Practice Discipleship alone is not enough. But it starts the conversation on how we shape ministry today, in our changing culture. And it is in the conversation that the Holy Spirit breathes new life and vision.

I am so deeply grateful to be in a synod that takes young people and their faith formation seriously. To be in a synod that focuses on faith practices that center young people to experience, grow and BE in faith, with others and on their own.

You can read in my [written report](#)⁹ some stories of how this has happened this last year at our synod youth ministry events. So I will just close with this quote from a high school youth who attended the Synod Journey last summer. During worship in her congregation, she gave a recap of her experience on the Journey. Her eyes had been opened during the trip to what it means to be a disciple, and she gave this reminder and challenge to her congregation: “In everyone’s heart beats the heart of Jesus Christ...When you hear your heartbeat, remember that Jesus beats in that heart and that you are living for Jesus. So go and love like Jesus.”

May our mission be so focused on equipping our young people – and all ages – with the practice of faith that future generations will only laugh when they hear we were once concerned that Jesus would only be a distant memory. Jesus a distant memory? Not in our synod. Not in our congregations. Not in our adults. Not in our young people.

⁹ See the 2013 Synod Assembly “Annual Report” at www.nemnsynod.org, under “Youth” then “Resources, Links and Events.”