

# Disciple Building in Youth Ministry

Tom East



Pope Francis tells us, “[This] is what Jesus wants today: missionary disciples.”<sup>1</sup> In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he goes on to say, “The Church is herself a missionary disciple” (40). “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (120).

I ran into a colleague who is in youth ministry for the American Baptist Church. He asked me what was new in Catholic youth ministry; I asked him how much time he had! I started to share about Pope Francis’s call to missionary discipleship. He stopped me and said, “But you’ve been encouraging youth to be engaged in service and work for justice for a long time. How is this different?” His question made me stop and think. The difference is that Pope Francis has situated missionary discipleship as a means of being Christ in the world by healing, sharing good news, and witnessing to the faith in a way that combines lives of service and faithfulness with evangelization.

In this call, our life as disciples becomes a witness and a proclamation of the Good News. It is all about “both and.” Our life of faith is service *and* witness. As disciples we are engaged in justice *and* evangelization. This kind of life flows from an encounter with Christ’s presence that draws into deep relationship with the community gathered in his name.

This is a description of our hoped for outcome of youth ministry: the formation of missionary disciples. This outcome leads us to really look at all of our ministries in a new way.

## LOOKING AT YOUTH MINISTRY WITH NEW EYES

In many parishes, much of the effort put into ministry with youth focuses on participation and promoting education in the faith, providing a very programmatic response to adolescents that complements the evangelization and formation that they receive at home and as children within the community. The problem is that many youth haven’t been evangelized and don’t have a relationship with Christ that would provide the context for the good activities and helpful faith learning that they find in youth ministry and in sacramental preparation programs. This could be the reason that so many youth

discontinue their practice of the faith after they have been confirmed.

Instead of focusing on participation and learning, we could be focusing on spiritual growth. Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson identified a similar dynamic in their book, *Move — What 1000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth*. They described this as the “Church Activity Model for Spiritual Growth.” In this model, “a person who is far from God participates in church activities which produces a person who loves God and loves other” (17). Their work in listening to members of these communities revealed that the premise behind this model is faulty. Many people who are attracted to participate never really grow spiritually and a large percentage of community members feel stuck in their spiritual growth.

What was needed was a focus on the individual faith journey. They identified four phases and three movements. An aspiring disciple moves from *Exploring Christ* to *Growing in Christ*, then moves from *Growing in Christ* to being *Close to Christ*. The final movement is *Becoming Christ-Centered*. What surprised the researchers was the large number of faithful members in good churches who felt that they were stuck after their initial exploration of what it means to be a Christian. These churches seem most suited to attracting members but the ministries did not provide enough differentiation to really help members grow spiritually from one phase to the next (21).

In a 2009 *Group* magazine article titled, “The Future of Youth Ministry,” authors engaged a variety of leaders in thinking about this current moment and looking ahead. “Our promotions are performance-driven — tied to the number of bodies that show up for our events. ...we default to techniques that are beholden to numerical growth more than spiritual growth...” In the future, youth ministry needs to move from being focused on the large group events, characterized by the spotlights and microphones, to small-group faith conversations and engagement in service as the vehicles for promoting authentic spiritual growth.

Dr. Kara E. Powell and Brad M. Griffen found other evidence helpful to us in our quest to form young disciples. Their research into “Stickyfaith” looked at the factors for young adults who continue to practice the faith. They found a large number of youth who participated in youth ministry activities and who thought that they would continue with faith practice but didn’t. The difference for those who did continue was the development of a personal prayer life and the engagement in

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, September 14, 2013 Radio Address for Vatican Radio. <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-jesus-wants-missionary-disciples>.

the communal practices of faith.<sup>2</sup> The research shows that it isn't just about showing up or filling the chairs.

In his work *Young Catholic America — Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church*, Dr. Christian Smith identified specific pathways for Catholic youth who remain committed and practicing. These youth were “well-formed in Catholic faith and practice as children, whose faith became personally meaningful and practiced as teenagers, whose parents (reinforced by other supportive Catholic adults) were the primary agents cultivating that lifelong formation” (186).

His work emphasizes the importance of religious experience (encounters) as well as the development of the skills that are needed to participate in the communal practices of faith. Youth will continue to do things as young adults that they are good at and that they have experienced as being helpful in their life. Youth who never really become skilled at participating in liturgy or being part of the faith community will likely not continue as young adults.

Catholic youth who become more adept at being Catholic, like attending Mass or Sunday school more, will continue to engage in these behaviors during the transition to emerging adulthood. (197)

This research points the way to renewed ministry practices that focus on spiritual growth and the engagement in the practices of being a disciple. Forming young disciples is intentional and goes beyond getting them to show up and be in the chairs while they experience energized performances. *More is just more. Slick is just slick.*

These perspectives remind us of these key factors in our efforts in helping disciples grow:

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2 Dr. Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Dr. Cheryl A. Crawford, *Stickyfaith — Youth Worker Edition — Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-term Faith in Teenagers*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publications, 2011), page 21.

- \* Focus on spiritual growth and the needs of individual youth.
- \* Focus on helping youth feel a sense of belonging.
- \* Help youth develop internal faith practices.
- \* Help youth engage in communal practices of faith.
- \* Focus on service, faith-sharing, witness, inspiring prayer, and hands-on faith experiences.
- \* Support parents, families, and faith-filled adults sharing faith with youth.

## GROWING YOUNG DISCIPLES

In Sherry Weddell's book *Forming Intentional Disciples — The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, she shares her experience that an emphasis on discipleship at all ages changes our ministries. “The presence of a significant number of disciples changes everything...” (80).

Her work seems to reinforce the importance of having communities with visible, active, intentional disciples. This gives youth something to look towards — a model of what it means to be a faithful adult.

So, where do we start? We start by acknowledging that something is shifting and changing, that our ministry needs to begin with the young person today and the ways that he or she approaches faith. Frank Mercadante, Director of Cultivation Ministries, explains the shift we are experiencing:

Many of us who are older, we came from a modern perspective. We took a cognitive approach to faith; we led with the head. Youth today are postmodern. Much of their truth comes through experience. They consider emotion so much more a part of how they understand life.... This requires a real shift and retooling in how we do youth ministry. And that's why it's so important that we learn to become archi-

## OTHER RESOURCES

### More than Dodgeball Blog – Simple Youth Ministry

<http://blog.simplyyouthministry.com/tag/rick-lawrence/>

### Discipleship Focused Youth Ministry

[http://www.discipleshipym.com/?utm\\_source=Discipleship+Focused+Youth+Ministry&utm\\_campaign=4dfe9f9a8e-Email\\_Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b73bc36566-4dfe9f9a8e-326907449](http://www.discipleshipym.com/?utm_source=Discipleship+Focused+Youth+Ministry&utm_campaign=4dfe9f9a8e-Email_Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b73bc36566-4dfe9f9a8e-326907449)

See especially:

- \* Video — What is Discipleship Focused Youth Ministry?
- \* One Thing that MUST Change in Youth Ministry (February 24, 2015)
- \* 10 Tips to Consider When Starting a New Discipleship Group (March 3, 2015)

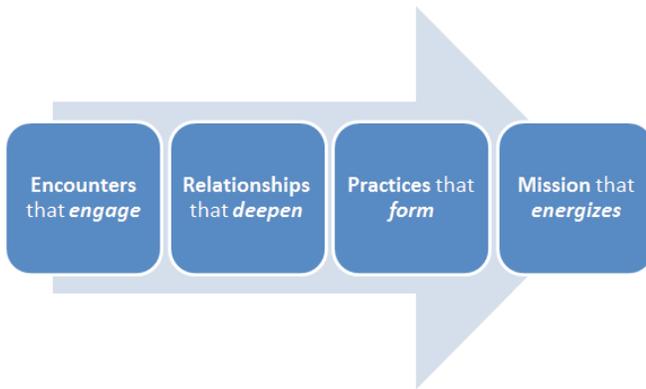
The State of Youth Ministry by Rick Lawrence

[http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/state\\_of\\_ym\\_part\\_1\\_-\\_group.pdf](http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/state_of_ym_part_1_-_group.pdf)

pects of encounter. We need to look at giving them an experience of God that is both horizontal and vertical, vertical in the sense that we need to become architects of encounter with Jesus Christ as opposed to simply giving them a cognitive understanding of Jesus Christ. Faith will always be head, heart, and hands, but the access ramp today is much more the heart and the hands and later on down the road comes that cognitive understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Research with young adults, conversations with young people, and experience in ministry reveal four experiences that help young disciples grow as witnesses and as people in mission.

## ENCOUNTERS THAT ENGAGE



Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, young people are often bewildered and filled with questions. They long to encounter Christ, and they want to have someone walk with them in their questions. They want a first-hand experience of God, and they want that experience to be connected to their everyday life.

Youth encounter God in sacraments, prayer, community, in the Word, nature, service, witness, friendship, acts of kindness, hospitality, silence, creativity, art, and music.

According to Cardinal George, “(Pope Francis) wants bishops to be part of this culture of encounter — encountering Christ and therefore encountering those that Christ loves. Once you have the relationship, then the ideas make sense. Otherwise, it’s a debating society. So you don’t start with the idea. You start with a person and relationship. The pope is reminding us of this.”<sup>4</sup>

How can we rethink our ministries with youth so that we are providing a series of encounters and opportunities to reflect on these experiences? How can we become architects of encounter for young people?

3 Frank Mercadante, Cultivation Ministries, Video: “Frank Mercadante on Encounter” posted on the YouTube channel for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI-0jUAZfsU>.

4 Cardinal Francis George, *The Chicago Tribune*, Interview on December 19, 2013. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-12-19/news/ct-george-pope-quotes-met-1218-20131219\\_1\\_jesus-christ-gift-freedom](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-12-19/news/ct-george-pope-quotes-met-1218-20131219_1_jesus-christ-gift-freedom).

## RELATIONSHIPS THAT DEEPEN

Youth hunger to belong, to have a community that cares about and accepts them. Like all of us, youth can feel insecure and wonder if they are worthy of love and friendship. They experience God’s presence in a community when they experience being welcomed, accepted, affirmed, and challenged. Relationships deepen their experience of God and provide models for discipleship.

Relationships experienced in the community gathered as the Body of Christ deepen the experience of encounter. Frank Mercadante explains this dynamic:

Engineering or architecting that encounter with Jesus Christ in the vertical way is critical but in addition to that young people need that horizontal encounter. That encounter is with the Body of Christ. You see, young people today are not so much looking for something to believe in as much as something to belong to. So we need to be a Church that accompanies young people. An important part of encounter is relationships which are the highest priority of young people today. So we need to learn how to bring about encounter in community and develop more of an accompanying approach.

Youth experience belonging in their family, in the church community, in friendships, in mentor relationships, in peer relationships, and in a variety of communities in which they gather for common interests and shared action.

How can we retool our ministries, take on an accompaniment model for ministry, and build the relationships that will help young disciples grow?

## PRACTICES THAT FORM

Youth hunger to know and understand what friendship in Christ really means in their life. They want to know the gospels; they seek the teachings of the faith. They long for a way to find answers to their questions.

Youth grow in their faith understanding when they experience faith in action, when they learn about Scripture, and when they learn about the teachings of our church. They are formed by the practices of discipleship:

- \* prayer
- \* reading the Bible
- \* growing in faith
- \* living faith
- \* witnessing
- \* belonging to community
- \* participating in Mass and reconciliation

## MISSION THAT ENERGIZES

Youth hunger to make a difference, to be able to contribute and share their gifts. They learn about their gifts through relationships and through the community. Someone trusts them and gives them a chance to do something that matters, something that makes a difference for someone.

Youth experience having a chance to serve others through acts of service, ministry, and leadership.

## WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

To form adolescents for discipleship, we can build on the resources of our community and elements of our current youth ministry practice. But we need to look at some things in new ways.

**Look broadly at the youth population and develop targeted ministries for different segments.** Some youth and their families are looking to go deeper and become more engaged in formation and service. Other youth and families need evangelization and invitation. Some young people are anxious to come to weekly gatherings and join communities; others resist this kind of participation but are longing to have someone to talk to about their faith. We need a differentiated approach that begins with the variety of young people.

**Engage families and see parents as part of our ministry.** Parents need to be inspired and equipped to take the lead in the spiritual formation of their children.

**Look broadly at our community and engage lots of adult disciples who are willing to spend time with youth.** Notice I didn't say, "Recruit more youth ministry leaders." Discipleship is about developing the practices of being a disciple of Jesus which is something we learn in community and in relationship with other disciples. Who are the adults in your community whom you want youth to "catch" faith from?

**Focus on spiritual growth and attend to youth in a holistic way.** Youth are more than just a family member or learner. Our ministry responses and faith formation need to address and engage the whole young person and look at ways to help each young person take the next step. It is especially important to invest time in helping youth who have experienced evangelization and encounter to take the deeper steps toward accountability, witness, and engagement in mission.

**Help youth do what disciples do and get good at it!** Our ministries could focus less on participation and learning information and more on skills and practices of being a disciple. When youth are good at praying on their own, reading the Bible, participating in Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation, engaging in service and witnessing to their faith, they will continue to do these things and seek communities and relationships that support them in being disciples.

**Touch their hearts and make it personal.** Youth yearn to belong and relate to people who care about them and value them as individuals. To build this relationship, we need to learn

names, know youth, and provide ministries that move, inspire, and engage.

**Provide multiple contact points.** Youth grow in commitment through a variety of relationships. They benefit from hearing different voices that provide an echo of faith.

**Listen and include the youth, families, and leaders from among the diverse cultures within the community.** Dioceses and parishes are learning new ways to come to know and include the needs and gifts of people from various cultures in developing authentic and inclusive ministry responses.

**Go where the youth are, including technology.** The roots of youth ministry are to go to the corners where youth hang out. To do this today, we should be going to the web, and we should be meeting youth in technology as a means to draw them towards gathered participation with the faith community.

**Engage youth in ministries that help them belong, believe, and share their gifts.** These elements address fundamental human needs that profoundly shape the youth and young adult years. Ministry that addresses these elements develops the commitment and identity that are foundational to formation as growing young disciples.

Jesus said many things to his disciples, but there were two things that he explicitly told them to do:

"This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19).

And

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20).

Youth ministry that is disciple-building will follow these commands. We will lead youth to encounter Christ in Eucharist and to grow in friendship and faithfulness in their relationship with their loving God. We will also lead youth to go out and be missionary disciples. They will go beyond us as they lead lives of witness, faithfulness, healing and justice, catching others in the energy of their faith as they go.

*A version of this article also appears on the websites for the Center for Ministry Development: Youth Ministry Access ([youthministry-access.org](http://youthministry-access.org)) and Fashioning Faith ([fashioningfaith.org](http://fashioningfaith.org)). |*

*Tom East is the Director of the Center for Ministry Development and Project Coordinator for the Certificate in Youth Ministry Studies Program. He is the author and editor for Leadership for Catholic Youth Ministry (Revised Edition, 23rd Publications, 2013), and Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry (Saint Mary's Press, 2008).*