

Why do youth ministry?

The answer seems obvious: we do youth ministry because we want our youth to be Christians. The purpose of youth ministry is to nurture faith in youth. That is not so hard. The *hard* question is “HOW should we nurture faith in youth?” By looking at Central Plains congregations, we can begin to see how most of us have answered that question: by providing Sunday School, youth group, mentor programs and membership instruction classes.

Still, is “with youth group and Sunday School” an adequate answer to “How should we nurture faith in youth?” No. It is not specific enough. One needs to know *what we do* in youth group and Sunday School that nurtures faith. That is what this handbook is about. It is to help you clarify your goals for your youth ministries and identify specific strategies to achieve those goals.

Before we get into the practical stuff, we need to begin with some theology. Don’t groan! We’ll keep it short and simple. In the next pages we’ll ask:

If we are “nurturing faith,” what do we mean by “faith”?

What does God intend for people and the world?

What do youth need?

How do we bring God’s intentions and the needs of youth together to nurture faith?

See how neatly that all ties together? Let’s get started.

What we mean by “faith”

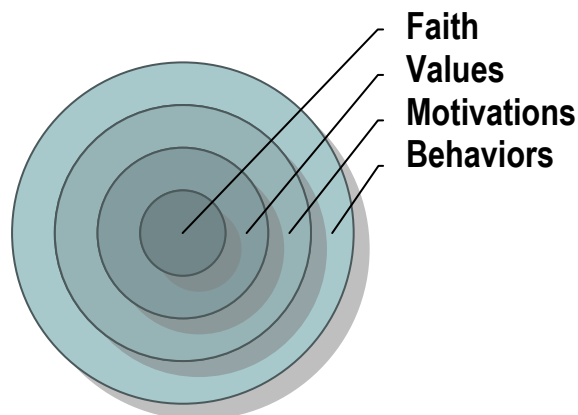
Faith Identity

Psychologically speaking, the main task of adolescence is to create a coherent identity. Identity formation means

integrating your various roles (student, friend, daughter, employee, etc.) into one self;
identifying values that cut across all your roles; and
learning to appreciate your own uniqueness and individuality.

In the church, we want the identities of our youth to be rooted in Christ. So, in youth ministry we are concerned with the formation of a *faith identity* in our youth.

Faith is the belief system at the center of a person’s being that gives meaning and purpose to life. Faith determines our values. Our values shape our motivations, which in turn shape behavior.¹ Our task is to continually help youth see the connections between these various layers and help them grow in consistency and in Christ-likeness.



Components of Faith

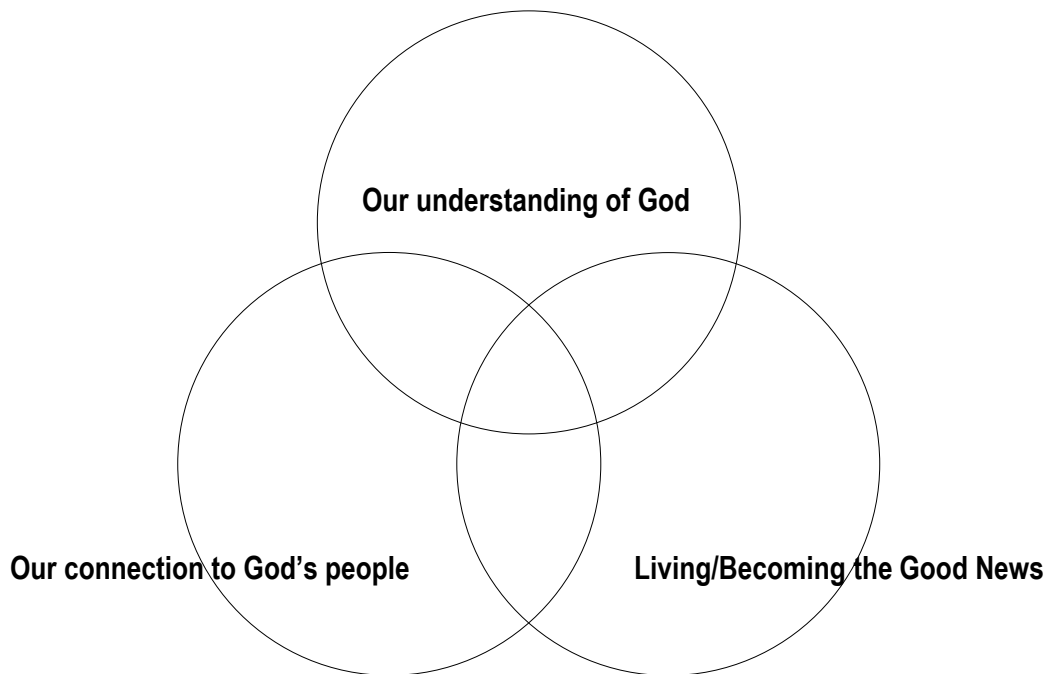
Faith identity has three interrelated components, which are illustrated below.

First, the rational component. This is what we know and understand about who God is and what God expects of us.

Second, the relational component. This is our connection with the people of God in the community of believers.

Third, the lived component of faith. This is living what we believe and becoming good news to other people.²

Here's an illustration of these concepts. We'll use the image of three interlocking circles several times. Can you detect a pattern in what the circles represent each time?



We can nurture faith identity in our youth by giving attention to these components of faith. Since the first component is “what we know about God,” we’ll turn to that topic next.

Who is God and What Does God Desire?

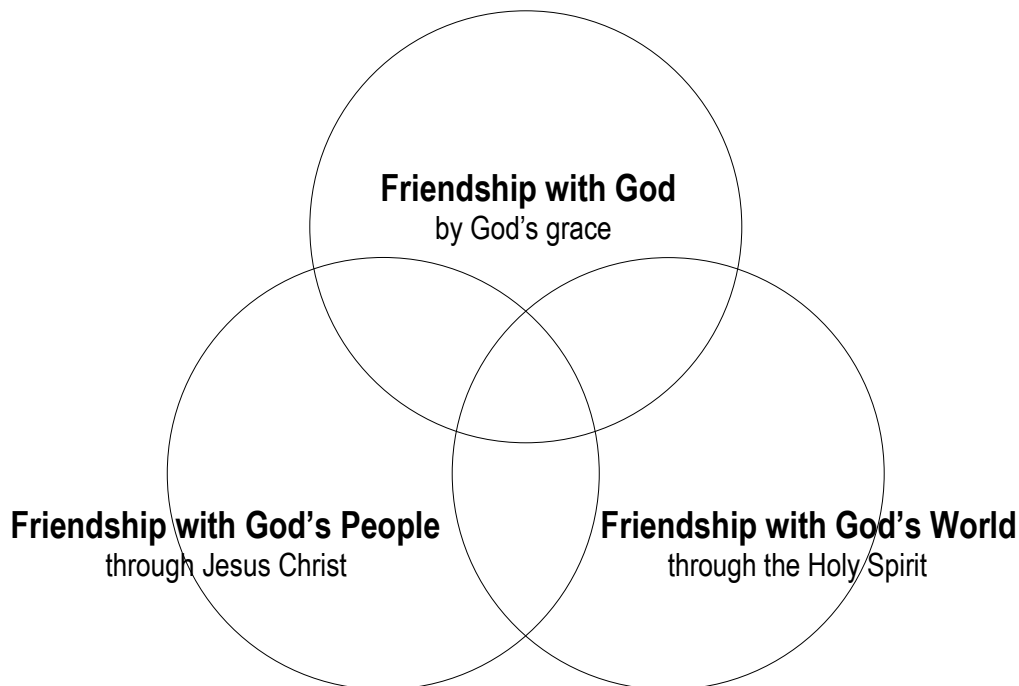
The first component in faith identity is understanding who God is and what God expects of us. So, as adults nurturing faith identity in youth, we want to understand that ourselves! Moreover, we need to be able to communicate that to youth in a way that they will understand.

Without going into pages and pages of theology, let me just summarize what we believe about God in this way: What God is doing in the world is *making friends*.³ God created people to be in relationship with God. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in Eden and broke their covenant with God, God has been at work to reconcile (reconnect) people to himself. God sent his only son Jesus Christ to give us this message and demonstrate God's love for us on the cross. This is the nature of the kingdom of God and the mission of the church that Jesus established: reconciliation, right relationship, renewed life.

We believe that God calls us make friends as well. We do that in three interrelated ways: through our friendship with God, through friendship with God's people (the church), and through friendship with the world.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and e e of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.

II Cor. 5:18-20a



That's the basic theology I referred to earlier. Now let's see how that informs youth ministry.

What Attracts Youth to Church—and Keeps Them There?

Now that we have the words to explain who God is and what God desires from us, how do we connect that with youth? How do these ideas find a place in their hearts and minds? What do youth want that the church can provide? We need to look at things from a teen's perspective. One way to do that is to ask, what attracts youth to church and what makes them want to stay connected? Carol Lytch decided to find out.⁴

Lytch is a parent and seminary professor who researched what keeps teens actively participating in church life. She spent a year getting to know three congregations (mainline, evangelical and Catholic) whose high school seniors were still actively involved in church. She identified three needs that these churches were successfully meeting for their youth:

the need for **meaning**

the need to **belong**

the need for opportunities to develop **competence**

Let's take a brief look at each of these.

Meaning

Congregations can provide youth with a sense of the meaning of life: answers to questions like “why do I exist?” and “what is life all about?” Churches offer answers that other institutions in society do not. Public school, the media, civic organizations and sports clubs do not address the fundamental “why” questions of life. That is our job, and our kids need us to do it.

Belonging

This comes as no surprise. We know how important it is for teens to “fit in.” Of course, this need is driven by the developmental task of identity formation. Where I belong has everything to do with who I am. We must help youth understand *and feel* that they belong in the church.

Lytch found that several factors influenced how well a church met a teen's need to belong:

- the opportunity to make friends within youth group, which is more likely if the group meets regularly and frequently
- having a physical space designated for the youth
- offering significant human resources in the form of staff or volunteer leaders
- having an optimal degree of openness in the web of social relationships in the congregation
- personal characteristics of the adult youth leaders such as humility, vulnerability and warmth
- how well friendships from church transferred to settings outside of church.⁵

Competence

Teens also look for **opportunities to develop competence**. Again, the connection to identity formation is clear. Understanding what we are good at develops our understanding of who we are and what we have to contribute to the world. In the context of church, Lytch found that teens “are attracted to high goals, standards of excellence, demands worthy of their attention and energy, and rites of passage marking steps toward their adulthood.”⁶

In the congregation, youth can find opportunities to develop competence as a youth group leader, in a choir or worship band, or as a teacher of younger children. Rites of passage are especially important to seniors as they anticipate leaving home and church and making it on their own.

Now that we have further insight into what youth seek from their congregations, we can explore how we connect these needs with what God is doing in the world.

Connecting Youth with the Mission of God

We nurture faith in youth by connecting their needs with the mission of God. We do this in the context of congregational life. Every faithful congregation will help all its members cultivate habits that increase their friendship with God, the church and the world.

The following habits nurture growth in each of these three areas:

awareness, that is, an openness and receptivity to God, self, others and the world

loving, that is, a caring, faithful commitment to the good of the other(s)

discernment/participation, that is, an ability to recognize God's voice and direction within one's self and in the world, and a commitment to action that faithfully responds to God's love and call by joining what God is being and doing.⁷

As these habits are nurtured within the whole congregation, the three parallel needs of youth are met:

- cultivating **awareness** or *friendship with God* meets a teen's need for **meaning**
- nurturing **loving** or *friendship with God's people* meets a teen's need for **belonging**
- encouraging **discernment/participation** or *friendship with God's world* meets a teen's need to develop **competence**.

The following chart summarizes what we have said so far.

What God is doing in the world is making friends.

We join in God's work in three ways...

friendship with God

friendship with God's people

friendship with God's world

These correlate with the needs of our youth...

the need for meaning

the need for belonging

the need to develop competence

...which we can meet by

cultivating awareness

nurturing loving

encouraging discernment and participation

What does this mean for you as a youth leader?

I encourage you to commit these triads to memory and let them guide your ministry. Then, you can design activities and choose curricula that address all of these areas in a balanced way. By keeping your focus on these areas and keeping balance between them, you nurture faith in youth in a way that is both *faithful* to God's mission and *meets the needs* of your youth! How cool is that?!

NOTES

¹Bergen, Abe, *Youth and Faith* (Newton, Kansas: Faith & Life Press, 1995), 5

²*Ibid.*, 10-12

³Kropf, Marlene, *Markers of Healthy Christians/Congregations* paper (Elkhart, IN: MC USA, October 2004 revision), p. 1

⁴Lytch, Carol, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 27-33.

⁵*Ibid.*, 39-40

⁶*Ibid.*, 2

⁷Kropf, 7

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Youth Group: Starting the Year

Start the year with these meetings:

1. A meeting of all adult youth leaders: this would include the youth sponsors (both outgoing and incoming), Sunday School teacher, Christian Education chair, mentor coordinator, and pastor. It may also be a good idea to include one or two parents and one or two of the youth.
2. A planning meeting with the youth.
3. A meeting of the youth sponsors.

Agenda for meeting #1:

- a. Review the goals and accomplishments of the previous year. Ask:
 - What went well? What did not go so well?
 - What were the goals for last year and how well were they met?
 - What needs arose among the group and how can they be addressed this year?
- b. Ask the question: What does God seem to be doing among our youth? List these.
- c. Ask everyone to answer the question: What is your God-given dream for the youth of our congregation? Talk together about what you hope and dream for youth ministry in your church.
- d. Prayerfully brainstorm possible goals for this year, building on what has already happened, what the youth have said and done, and what the Holy Spirit is saying to you. Make a list of these. Pray together and then choose one or two as the goals for the year.
- e. Now talk together briefly about how you will know when you have achieved these goals. What specifically will that look like?
- f. Next, take these goals to the planning meeting with the youth.

Agenda for meeting #2: This meeting needs to involve as many of the youth as possible. Many youth groups have a traditional way to kick off the year. Be sure the meeting includes the following:

- a. Present the goals to the youth, explaining how and why you came up with them. Ask them if they can affirm them and if they have any further suggestions. Revise the goals if need be. If the youth suggest significant changes, the sponsors should take a few moments to confer privately together and agree to the changes among themselves before agreeing to the changes with all the kids. You all need to be willing to put your energy behind these goals!
- b. Brainstorm together with the youth HOW to meet the goals through youth group activities. Have them suggest activities that would meet the goals.

Some further suggestions:

--Throughout the year, involve the youth in planning every meeting as much as possible. The more they take the initiative to plan meetings, the better. The role of the sponsors is ideally to guide them as they plan, not to do all the planning.

--As a rule, try not to do any youth group activity that does not meet one of your goals. By the same token, think of ways to make any kind of activity an opportunity to meet one of your goals. This will help you stay focused.

Agenda for meeting #3:

The youth sponsors **must** meet together on a regular basis to build relationships with one another, pray together for the youth group, and evaluate how things are going. As sponsors you will only be effective to the extent that you become a team in the true sense of the word. Decide at the beginning of the year when and how often you will have this regular meeting. Meet at least once every other month. Sunday dinner or before or after a youth group meeting would be good possibilities. Focus on building trust and good communication. Every time you meet, do these three things: Listen to one another, Evaluate how things are going, and Pray together. You will be amazed at how God can work through these simple practices!

The Changing Reality of Youth Ministry in Central Plains

Youth ministry in Central Plains churches has changed a lot over the past few decades. Some examples:

Church does not take priority for many families. Sports, drama, clubs and jobs have equal or greater priority. This limits the time we get with youth.

Kids don't need church for social interaction. Just getting together to have fun or build relationships doesn't meet their need.

(Except in places where youth don't get to interact with Mennonite peers at school.)

Youth have exponentially more entertainment options; it's harder to keep their attention.

Increasingly, adults do the planning and make the decisions for youth group rather than help the youth them do it. Adult leaders struggle to motivate youth.

Youth today do face greater pressures: academics, sports, college choice, sex all loom much larger in an adolescents' world today.

Adult youth leaders must address these pressures in meaningful ways; and it's a big job!

Because of these changes, congregational youth ministry now requires *more intentional leadership* and *more skillful youth leaders*.

What hasn't changed much is how we do youth ministry. In general, our churches appoint married couples to two year terms, use a youth council model of leadership, and use a meeting pattern based on Bible study, service and fellowship. These practices have been in place for decades. A persistent pattern I see in our churches is that almost no clear direction is given to youth sponsors. Usually, the lines of support and accountability between sponsors and other congregational leaders are either unclear or defunct.

In many churches we continue to assume that sponsors don't have to be told what to do or how to do it; and that any willing couple is equipped to be youth sponsors—no special training or skills needed. However, sponsors themselves usually worry about their skills and feel that the stakes are high. Many sponsors end up feeling inadequate, frustrated, and unsupported. Frequently, sponsors say that after two years they are just starting to understand their role and to get to know the kids, but they are too burned out to continue. I want to emphasize that this scenario is not the case everywhere, but these are persistent patterns.

What is the Remedy?

I suggest that it is three-fold:

Support for youth leaders

Accountability of youth leaders

Focus: being clear about what we want to accomplish

Underlying these three things is **the critical importance of pastoral leadership.** I observe that the churches with the thriving youth ministries are likely to have focused attention from a pastor, whether the single/lead pastor or a co/youth pastor. To have a vibrant youth ministry, the pastoral staff and the deacon/elder group must give attention to youth ministry in their congregation.

We must recognize that youth ministry is ministry and give the same support and accountability we give to elders/deacons. Direction and accountability from top leaders must be built into the structure. Youth ministry must be integrated into the overall vision and strategic plan of the congregation.

Let's take a look at the **three key leadership issues** for congregational youth ministry. For each issue, there are questions to ask about your situation in order to help you and other leaders strengthen your congregation's youth ministry.

Support of sponsors from congregational leaders:

Who chooses sponsors? Do those who choose and invite candidates have an ongoing investment in the youth ministry? Whom do sponsors answer to, how and how often?

How are youth sponsors trained and nurtured? Who makes sure that the sponsors have opportunities for skill development? Is money allocated for them to attend training events?

Are the pastor and elders explicit in their support for youth sponsors? Do they acknowledge & support the pastoral role the sponsors play with youth?

Pay attention to who has power in the congregation when answering these questions. If the answer to the question is a group or person without much power, there won't be much actual support.

Accountability of sponsors to the congregation:

What is the role of youth sponsors in general? There are many possible answers. What is important is that the sponsors understand what the congregation expects. Does each individual sponsor have a clearly defined role with specific tasks to do? Do the sponsors function as a team, all pulling in the same direction? Do they communicate regularly and effectively among themselves?

Is there one sponsor who leads the sponsor team and is ultimately responsible for the performance of the sponsor team? This would enhance accountability and bring clarity to the sponsors' roles.

Are there requirements for sponsors to meet, such as commitment to Christ, church membership, and adherence to stated goals? It is only reasonable to expect that those who are role models and ministers to our youth meet minimum requirements. If the practice has been to invite only married couples, recognize that that means that marriage is in fact a requirement. Is this really necessary? Is it the best way to structure your leadership group?

Are sponsors expected to report to the congregation or a specific committee? If so, how often and how?

Focus We absolutely must be clear about what we are trying to accomplish in our youth ministry. Not knowing this leads sponsors and teachers to expend a lot of energy in unnecessary activity and in trying to figure out what to do. Your congregation may decide that your youth ministry exists for Christian education, relationship building, leadership development, a bridge into church life, spiritual mentoring, peer support & accountability, service or other worthy goals. You can realistically only work at one or two goals at a time.

What are the goals and how are they going to be met? Be sure to assign appropriate goals to each ministry setting. For example the church may decide that Sunday School is primarily for teaching the Bible and theology while youth group is primarily about exposing your youth to ministry opportunities and discernment of their own contribution to the church. Once the goals are known, the activities should all be designed to meet the goals. This makes it a lot easier for the adult leaders to plan with confidence. It also gives youth the sense that their church takes their needs seriously.

I hope you find these ideas helpful. Please contact me with questions or if you would like me to work with your leadership group to make changes in your congregation's youth ministry. Our reality is changing, and if we can change with it, we will be more effective in our efforts to nurture faith in our youth.

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In Touch Newsletter text Feb. 06