

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”

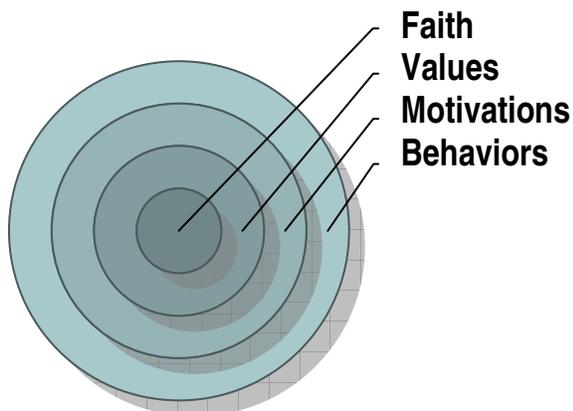
Faith Identity

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

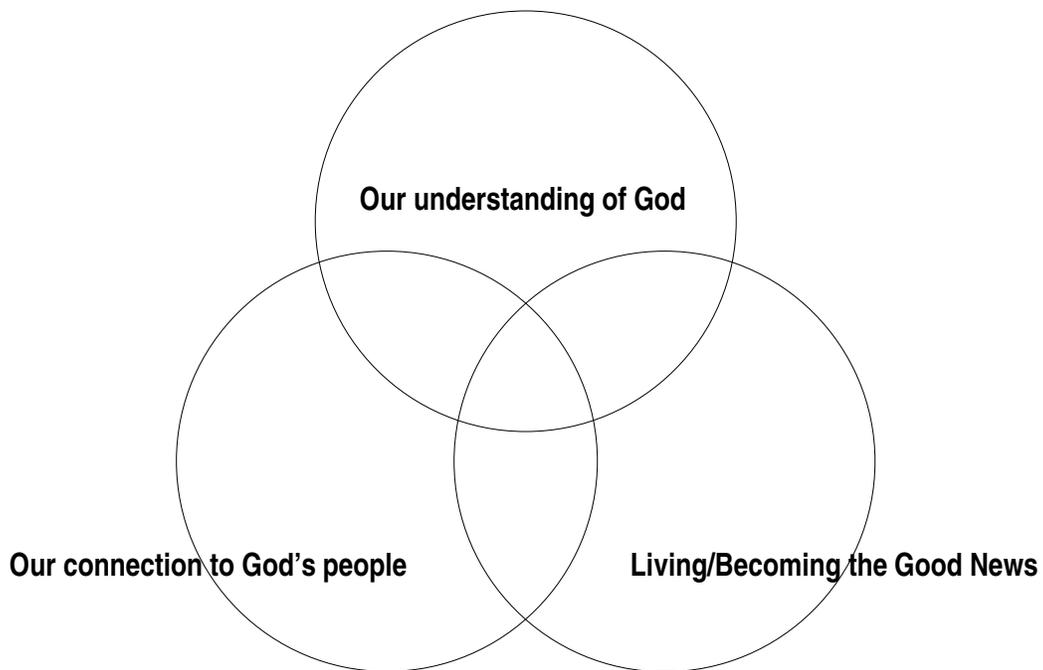
Faith identity has three interrelated components, which are illustrated below.

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?

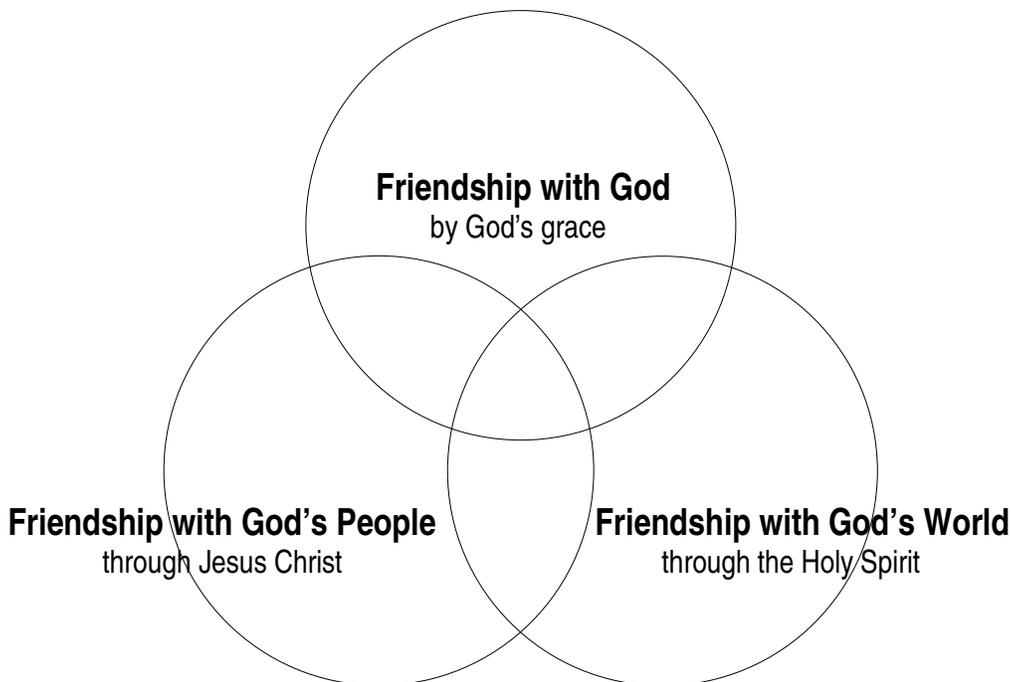
The first component in faith identity is understanding who God is and what God expects of us. So, as adults nurturing faith identity in youth, we want to understand that ourselves! Moreover, we need to be able to communicate that to youth in a way that they will understand.

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 entrusting the message 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
by God's grace

friendship with God's people
through Jesus Christ

friendship with God's world
through the Holy Spirit

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