I. At Issue: “Youth Faith Drift - Congregations Who Buck the Trend”

Most Christian denominations are experiencing dramatic drops in the percentage of older adolescents and young adults involved in worship and ministry. The Roman Catholic and mainline churches experience the drop-off after young people have been confirmed. Many youth and parents see Confirmation as the culmination of religious education and most parishes struggle with youth ministries targeted for senior high young people. Baptist and other evangelical churches find that young people are dropping out of the life of the church during or directly after high school.

Conventional wisdom has it that this is a natural, temporary, drift from the church, caused by life transitions and social experimentation. For many church leaders this drift has not been cause for great concern because of the expectation that young people will return to the church when they get married or, if not then, when they have children. Indeed, the myth of returning to church during these stages of young adulthood has been debunked by research that reveals most don’t return and if they do, many return to a different faith tradition than their own (Martinson 2000; Barna 2001; Olson 2003).

As challenging as the overall picture remains, practitioners and educators know from experience that there are remarkable exceptions to this trend across denominations – vibrant, thriving youth ministries and young people exist for whom faith is a deep commitment. Might one be able to accurately describe this “vitality of faith in young people?” Might the congregations where such youth exist or have existed in significant numbers for six, eight or ten years be identified? Might a possible relationship between the youth ministry of the congregation and the faith vitality of the young people be explored? Might one discover and describe congregations with exemplary youth ministries?
II. The Study’s Purpose: “Give Voice to Quality Congregational Youth Ministry”

The Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry funded by the Lilly Endowment was designed: “To identify congregations that consistently establish faith as a vital factor in the lives of their youth and young adults, to discover what accounts for their effective approach to ministry, and to make the results widely available for the benefit of other congregations.”

Inherent in the study’s overarching purpose were four specific goals:

- Seek an informed understanding of what congregations, families and communities do to nurture faith in young people; in so doing contribute to the expanding body of effective youth ministry practice.
- Articulate a new understanding of the “culture” of effective congregational youth ministry. Questions of vision, theology and integration, as well as specific practices of effective youth would be comprehensively explored.
- Add to the growing body of literature describing faith in postmodern youth and young adults.
- Provide language and resources that might be utilized in evaluating the enduring faithfulness and effectiveness of youth ministries in congregations.

III. The Study’s Methodology: “Listen, Look and Listen and Listen Again”

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed to get at the deep and rich realities and stories of young people of vital faith and the congregations nurturing them.

A large and diverse sample of 475 congregations from seven denominations (Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Covenant, Southern Baptist, Assemblies of God and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) across all regions of the United States were nominated as nurturing youth of vital faith. These congregations were nominated by youth leaders from their denominations on the basis of the congregations’ capacities to engender vital faith in young people as articulated in a 34 item, “portrait of youth Christian maturity” drawn from tested elements of former research (Five Cries of Youth and Effectiveness in Christian Education). These same items were incorporated into an evaluation form used by a team within the nominated congregation to validate whether or not their ministry was accomplishing what the external nominators perceived to be the case.

Based upon the results of the evaluations of the nominated congregations the 350 congregations receiving the highest evaluations were asked to participate in the study; 260 of those congregations consented to be surveyed. 131 congregations completed extensive surveys (301-354 questions) of their pastor, primary youth leader, volunteers, parents and youth; a total of 5796 individuals responded.

In addition 222 pastors and youth ministers from the 131 congregations provided responses to four, open-ended questions regarding their youth ministries.
From the 131 congregations surveyed, 21 congregations were chosen for in-depth weekend site visits by teams made up of an interviewer and a scribe. Three congregations (small, fewer than 250 in weekly worship attendance; medium, 251-750 in weekly worship attendance; and large, more than 751 in weekly worship attendance) were chosen from each of the seven denominations; all regions of the country were represented.

Executive summaries of the field notes from each visit were constructed by the interviewer on each team, reviewed by the scribe of that team and then sent to the congregation for review and response.

Each of the “data streams” (survey, open-ended question and site visit) were analyzed and the results compared and collated.

While Anglo Americans made up the largest percentage of those studied, Afro, Latino and Asian Americans were represented in the congregations involved.

IV. Critical Variable One: “Youth and Young Adults of Vital Faith”

In order to identify Christian congregations in the seven denominations who were doing effective youth ministry, a focused, consistent and broadly accepted process for identifying them had to be devised. The study’s advisory council decided to utilize already existing criteria that had proven their validity and might also provide the opportunity to make comparisons between youth in this study and those of historical studies.

With much debate, particularly focused on the “accessibility” of the items to people in the seven denominations, and, the “congruency” of the description of vital faith in young people to the theological convictions of each of the churches, the advisory council and research team developed a 34 item, 7 cluster description of “mature Christian faith” in youth (see appendix). Most of the items in the description were drawn from the characteristics of committed youth as defined by two previous studies: Five Crises of Youth and Effective Christian Education. These items describe the many facets of the desired “end products” of youth ministry as envisioned by thousands of people who formed these two national samples.

The description asserted: Youth with a mature Christian faith:

- Seek Spiritual Growth, Both Alone and With Others;
- Believe God is Present in the World;
- Act Out of a Commitment of Faith;
- Are Active with God’s People;
- Possess a Positive, Hopeful Spirit;
- Live Out a Life of Service;
- Live a Christian Moral Life.

While recognizing the difficulties and limitations of “defining” the dynamic power of a God of grace at work through the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of diverse persons and communities, the research team and the advisory council found that the resulting “imperfect snapshot” found widespread agreement among youth and adults and served the project well.
V. Critical Variable Two: “Congregations Establishing Vital Faith in Youth and Young Adults”

The congregations with exemplary youth ministries were identified by their reputation.

Youth leaders at every level of youth ministry across the 7 denomination were asked to nominate congregations for the study on the basis of their perceived capacity to generate mature Christian youth as described in the 7 cluster, 34 item mature Christian youth profile.

475 congregations from across the country were nominated. Small, medium and large congregations were included in this sample. Youth ministry leaders within the nominated congregations were sent a form based on the same 7 cluster, 34 item description of mature Christian youth and asked to evaluate to what extent their congregation was accomplishing what others perceived them to be doing. 350 of the congregations with the highest evaluations were asked to participate in the study; 260 consented; 131 including significant samples of small, medium and large congregations from the 7 denominations completed surveys of pastors, primary youth leaders, volunteers, parents and youth. 21 of these congregations representing all regions of the country were chosen for two day site visits.

Are the congregations identified through the procedures cited above establishing vital faith in youth and young adults? Are they truly exemplary?

Utilizing historical studies from which comparable data is available indicates that these congregations are indeed exemplary. Contrasting scores of young people themselves, adult youth workers, pastors and youth ministers, and parents with scores of former studies dramatically demonstrates the effectiveness of these congregations.

The self reports of young people show significantly higher scores than those of youth participating in earlier national studies. The young people in our study have scores that are statistically greater in measures of: Faith Maturity; A Personal Christianity; Private Religious Study; Exposure to Religious media; Non-Worship Participation; A Personal Religiousness; Participation in Bible Study and Prayer Groups; and Seeks Spiritual Growth (Each of the “phrases describe constructs fro which scores were computed and compare).

The youth in the exemplary youth ministry study are especially appreciative of involvement in the activities of their congregations; they show significantly higher than average scores on: Faith Impact of Church Involvement; Church-sponsored Trips; Leadership Development Activities; and Faith Influential Friends. In addition they give superior evaluations of their youth ministry’s: Emphasis on Prayer; Faith; Leadership; Safe and Caring Place as well as Participation in Congregation and Community.

These youth also rated their congregation’s: Warm, Challenging Climate; Congregation’s Moral Guidance; and Congregation’s Service Activities higher than youth did in previous studies.

The commitment of the adult youth workers is noted in the pastors’ written accounts and apparent in what the adult workers report about themselves. Their answers to items evidence a
Centrality of Faith coupled with a strong sense of Social Responsibility. Both assessments rank well above the average.

These much-involved youth leaders reflect enthusiastic opinions about their congregation’s: Effectiveness of Parental Education; Training of Adult Youth Workers; and Youth Ministry Characteristics; Welcoming Atmosphere; Pastoral Support of Christian Education and Youth Ministry; Congregation Makes Me Think; Importance of the Church to Me; and Congregation’s Social Interaction. All these assessments rank well above historical averages. The adult youth workers or volunteers in this study have a high opinion of what is being done in their congregation.

Youth ministers rate their own congregations significantly higher than youth ministers in historical studies. They give especially high marks to their congregation’s: Support for Youth Ministry; Climate of Warmth and Openness; and Pastoral Support for Youth Staff. Through the visits to selected congregations, these three factors have been found to be especially instrumental in achieving a strong youth ministry. They contribute significantly towards overcoming negative student attitudes. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that pastors in the exemplary congregations report significantly less Disconnect Between Youth and Adults and less Youth and Parent Disinterest.

The parents in these congregations rate themselves well above how parents have historically rated themselves. Parents give the adult youth workers high scores on: Centrality of Faith; Social Responsibility; Desire for Participating in Leadership; Community; and Spirituality.

The parents are pleased with the work of their congregation as a whole. They give the congregation high marks on: Congregation Helps Members do Outreach; Congregation Gives Moral Guidance; Congregation Promotes Service Activities; Congregation Makes Me Think; Members Experience Love and Support, Welcoming Atmosphere; and, Importance of This Church to Me. All of these are known to positively influence the faith of young people in a congregation.

With respect to the first objective of the study: “To identify congregations that consistently establish faith as a vital factor in the lives of youth and young adults,” the evidence indicates that these exemplary congregations are in fact doing so to a high degree of effectiveness. Comparisons between these exemplary congregations and those of previous studies on 86 aspects of youth ministry show that the congregations of this study scored significantly higher on 65 of those measures.

VI. Variable Three: “Youth In Exemplar Congregations?”

Inasmuch as the focus of this study is the on the faith of young people – the desired outcome of youth ministry – it is important to consider the evidences of faith that characterize the youth in the congregations in this study. What are their thoughts about God? What do they consider a committed Christian faith? What is the nature of their faith?

There are answers to these questions in the self-reports of the 2252 youth surveyed in these exemplary congregations. They have described important aspects of their faith in Jesus Christ.
What they report indicates that the desired outcome of these youth ministries is possible, i.e. there are young people today who give evidence of vital faith.

There are 12 differing aspects of faith that youth in the study associate with being a committed Christian. They are:

- A Personal Christianity
- Moral Responsibility
- Defends and Supports Friends
- Faith Maturity
- A Personal Religiousness
- Moral Integrity
- Seeks Spiritual Growth
- God Consciousness
- Lives a Life of Service
- Speaks Publicly About Ones Faith
- Private Religious Study
- Considers a Religious Vocation

The 1672 parents, 1430 adult youth workers and 222 pastors and youth ministers see external evidences of this vital faith. Most impressively, all three groups of these adults tend to see the same things in the youth.

Parents, adult youth workers as well as pastors and youth ministers identified seven aspects of faith in these youth:

- Positive Youth Response
- Youth’s Service Involvement
- Youth’s Outreach
- Making Faith a Way of life
- Evidence of a Positive Spirit
- Seeks Spiritual Growth
- Evidences Moral Responsibility

Historical assessments of youth on the first five of these seven aspects were available for youth minister. Again, scores where significantly higher in this than in the historical studies.

Interviews with the young people, adult youth workers, youth ministers and pastors in these congregations strongly supported the picture of vital faith in the youth of these exemplary congregations. Indeed what was most impressive in the interviews was the depth and freshness with which these young people give expression to the content of their faith and the manner in which it deeply informed their lives.

The data from both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the study provides overwhelming evidence that the young people in these congregations are men and women of vital faith!
VI. The Outcome: “Qualities, Practices and Cultures of Congregations Establishing Vital Faith in Youth and Young Adults”

What might an exemplary congregation be doing to establish vital faith in youth and young adults? Two sets of data from our study point to a rich mix of ideas and a promising response to this question for those interested in describing and practicing faithful and effective youth ministry.

First, the study provides an in-depth description of the youth ministries of these congregations. Further the study supplies data indicating that the youth of these congregations do indeed possess vital faith. Consequently, one can at the very least infer that there is some relationship between these two realities. This inference is supported by the witness of earlier studies that indicate a direct relationship between some of the qualities of the youth ministries of these congregations and the characteristics of their young peoples’ vital faith.

The most convincing evidence comes from the witness of the young people surveyed and interviewed. The young people interviewed regularly spoke directly about qualities, relationships and practices in the youth ministries in their congregations as critical to their life of faith. Many of the youth indicated that the youth ministry in their congregation had profoundly shaped both their life and their faith in specific and concrete ways. One young woman stated: “I experience God at work in the lives my friends and our adult leaders here; this church is the most real place in my life. I find hope and support for working out my life in a very difficult family situation. Without these people caring and praying for me, I don’t know how I would make it. I live off the worship experiences and people here who believe in me” Consequently, the study gives both a description of congregations doing exemplary youth ministry and considerable evidence that such ministry contributes to vital faith in youth and young adults.

What do these congregations with exemplary youth ministries look like? What are their qualities? Are their common practices? Do conceptual models of ministry emerge from their work?

From the early analysis of the three “data streams”—participant surveys, open-ended questions of pastors and youth ministers, and site visits and interviews—clear and promising responses to these critical questions are emerging.

Eight themes each containing several contributing elements emerge as the foundational components of these congregations with exemplary youth ministries. These 8 themes further align as three distinct clusters:

- Theological and Strategic Dynamics
- Qualities of Ministry
- Uniquely Integrated Practices.

In each congregation all these aspects of ministry coalesce to generate a “congregational youth ministry culture” that is larger and more effective than its constituent parts.
The three clusters present the “culture fabric” of these congregations with exemplary youth ministry.

**Theological and Strategic Dynamics**
Three of the emerging themes describe understands of God’s life and activity; the nature of faith; and the direction of ministry that follow from these convictions. They are:

- A Sense of the Presence and Activity of God:
- Emphasis on Spiritual Growth, Vocation and Discipleship; and
- Engagement in Outreach and Mission.

**Qualities of Ministry**
Three of the emerging themes describe the manner and excellence with which the people and the congregation involve themselves in each other’s lives. These qualities of ministry are:

- Congregational Priority and Support for Youth Ministry
- Significant Relationships and A Sense of Community; and
- Committed Competent Leadership.

**Uniquely Integrated Practices**
Two of the emerging themes describe ministry activities and their unique and synergistic alignment in each of the congregations. Even though common, identified youth ministry practices exist across the congregations, each congregation uniquely “custom designs and integrates” those practices in their context. These elements are:

- Common Effective Youth Ministry Practices; and
- “Custom Designed, Integrated Models” of Youth Ministry.

**Exemplary “Congregational Youth Ministry Cultures”**
When all the elements of each of these youth ministries have been identified, an impressive array of commitments, people, relationships and activities emerge. One still does not, however, have the full picture of what is going on in these communities of faith and their ministries. The genius of these places seems best described as a something bigger, something more, something almost mysterious. A “culture” seems to emerge with its pervasive and distinct “spirit” and “atmosphere” that is more powerful than its component parts. It’s the combination of the core values, people, relationships, expectations, mores, activities etc., that seems to generate this spirit and atmosphere, thus pointing to culture as a uniquely helpful image in understanding these exemplary youth ministries.

**The Spirit Culture of Youth Ministry**
The early analysis and summarization of the study’s finding point to dynamics of faithful and effective youth ministry that are at the same time familiar and new. Many of the qualities and practices of youth ministries in these exemplary congregations have been presented as the heart of youth ministry for years.

This study while confirming the power of these dynamics, discovers something more basic and critical to establishing vital faith in youth and young adults. It is the palpable and pervasive sense of the living, active presence of God at work among the peoples of the congregation and its youth ministry; at work through the ministries of the congregation in the world; and at work
with a passion that all peoples will have life and salvation that characterize these congregations. One congregation’s pastors, youth ministers, volunteers, parents and youth all spoke of their life together as a “God thing; it’s about God changing our lives and caring about the world. It’s about transformation! It’s about outreach, outreach, outreach!” It is the exemplary congregations’ communal celebration and practice of the Spirit of God that permeates all the values, relationships and practices that gives rise to an “atmosphere,” a “spirit,” a “culture” of life and mission.

Can it be that the critical issues in exemplary youth ministry are theological and ecclesiological? Early findings in this study at least point in this direction. It seems to be the commitments and practices regarding the nature and activity of God and the nature and activity of the church as she participates in the life of God, the body of Christ and the world that make the critical difference in these youth ministries that establish vital faith in youth and young adults.