

Voices of Hope: Promising Practices in Adolescent Faith Formation

by Tom East

Director, Center for Ministry Development

Many voices are calling for renewal of adolescent catechesis. Over the last ten years, researchers studied and named the current state of faith understanding and participation. There are also new documents that provide greater clarity in describing the content and outcomes for adolescent catechesis. Together, this information helps us to understand the situation as we attempt to name the gaps between what we hope for and what we are currently achieving in our catechetical efforts with youth.

During the same period, significant research and analysis about the best practices of faith formation is leading to a renewal of ministry efforts. A variety of leaders have developed projects to create or describe methods and strategies for faith formation that are effective in helping youth grow in their faith understanding and commitment. Some of these studies observe and report about communities that are experiencing positive results; others initiate new efforts. Together, these voices share the hope that can inspire renewed practices. These efforts help parish leaders understand what really works for communities who are intentional and passionate about catechizing adolescents. This essay provides a sampling from the research and the thinking of leaders about best practices in adolescent faith formation in parish settings.

It Is About the Parish

The parish community itself is identified as crucial in faith formation with adolescents. Some studies identify the parish as a whole, while others point to specific practices that parishes can engage in to share faith with youth. Two recent studies on youth ministry and faith formation came to the same conclusion in their overall finding: the life of the parish itself is the heart of faith formation for adolescents and their families. In *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, this is described as becoming a “willing parish.” These parishes are willing to fully engage youth within

the community and surround youth with love, care, support, and challenge:

[A community] that comes to know and treasure the youth in their midst will experience new ways of praying, celebrating, serving and learning. It is not about always letting youth have their way or about discarding the traditions of a community. But it is about letting youth have *a way to truly belong*. Youth and the community learn together and are transformed in the process.¹

In the *Spirit of Youth Ministry* project, the key finding for effective faith formation of adolescents is described as “The Culture or Spirit of the Congregation”:

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, practices, and activities that seems to generate this spirit and atmosphere.²

These communities form youth through the life and the lived theology of the parish that is expressed through the preaching, service life, community life, and other aspects of the congregation. Families are supported in sharing faith, and youth are gathered for youth ministry activities and programs. But the heart of formation is the life of the congregation itself. These communities identify and utilize the assets within their congregation to share faith with adolescents. These assets are different for each community, which creates a very positive starting point for communities seeking to enhance faith formation of adolescents:

In an asset-building approach every parish has Faith Assets. It is only a question of how many. Congregations need to discover those

that are already at work and then chart a plan for developing more assets. An asset-building approach offers very tangible qualities and practices that every parish can adopt that contribute to an effective youth ministry and nurturing youth of maturing Christian faith.³

These studies reinforce what we know from a broad variety of church documents and religious education theory: the faith community is the heart of faith formation. The life of the community sponsors Christian living. The community engages and includes youth while at the same time providing faith formation for youth in age specific ways, for families at home, and for youth using the broader resources in the wider community.

Within the life of the congregation, there are various ways of sharing faith. Through the *Valparaiso* project, Dorothy Bass researched the impact of engaging youth and adults in Christian practices.

... faith formation is something that happens, when it does, in the midst of doing and being together, as adults and youth accompany one another in addressing real questions needs, and concerns.⁴

This project encourages adults and youth to identify and develop Christian practices through which individuals live the Christian life. Living practices such as hospitality, charity, and prayer deepens faith understanding. Bass notes that the process of sharing life among the generations benefits not only the youth, but the whole community.

Sharing the life of faith across generational cohorts is at least as beneficial for the adults involved as it is for the youth, in part because young people sometimes articulate with great honesty concerns that are shared by the entire community. (Is this really true? How far must I go in welcoming those who are different? Is there any hope for this world? And so on.) Their energy is a gift, not a nuisance.⁵

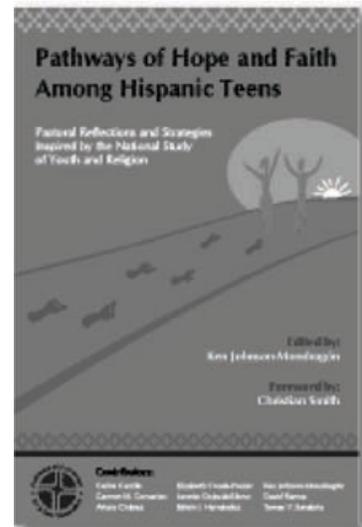
The *Generations of Faith* project, developed by John Roberto, was designed to explore intergenerational catechesis with people of all ages

in Catholic parishes. Parishes which implemented this model found that youth grew in faith through a variety of contacts: by being part of the whole community learning faith together, by exploring faith themes with their peers and reporting to the broader community, by sharing in leadership of intergenerational learning events, by participating in the events of church life, and by continuing faith sharing at home.⁶

In *Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens*, a vision for parish life is expanded in this analysis of a promising direction for ministry and catechesis with Hispanic youth and others from diverse cultural groups:

When thinking about how to structure an appropriate youth ministry for a multicultural parish that seeks to be united in spirit and mission, enriched by its diversity, and able to inculcate the Gospel in the various ethnic and cultural milieus of the faith, the model of the church as a 'community of communities' stands out.⁷

In this model, the parish supports the development of ministries for youth from different cultural groups. Within these ministries, evangelization and catechesis can rely on the strengths and leadership within the culture. It seems natural that parishes would provide a variety of small communities based on need and interest. When race, language, or culture is presented as a reason for distinctive ministries, this is sometimes misunderstood as segregation or treated as some type of threat to unity. The alternative is the development of a single ministry group that leaves out many youth and families.⁸



Through a variety of lenses, this analysis points to the power of the parish in sharing faith and in empowering faith sharing in a variety of settings. An image provided in the study of *Effective Practices in Catholic Youth Ministry* seems to summarize these insights about parishes sharing faith. A web of relationships grows and develops as youth grow in their ownership of the parish community and their connections with adults in the community. This web of relationships is built intentionally through concrete efforts: youth to youth, youth with adults, youth with their families, and youth with the parish community as a whole. Through this web of relationships, faith is mediated and youth are empowered as active young disciples.⁹

Youth Ministry Matters

Youth ministry supports and provides catechesis for youth in a variety of ways. In the *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* project, parish leaders described specific ways that youth ministry leaders helped the parish community own the ministry and faith formation of youth. This same study found that parishes with effective ministry placed the catechesis and evangelization dimensions at the heart of their efforts. These communities provide systematic and intentional catechesis as well as opportunities for catechesis that are informal and integrated through ministry efforts.¹⁰

The *Spirit of Youth Ministry* project described three “uniquely integrated practices” of youth ministries that demonstrated excellence in their faith formation. The first practice was a focus on families and households. The researchers in the *National Study of Youth and Religion* concur about the importance of this focus:

Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misconceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescent is their parents.¹¹

A second practice identified in the *Spirit* project described common youth ministry practices that were particularly effective in helping youth grow

in faith. In a similar way, the Effective Practices project named five practices that had a significant impact on youth and their faith growth:

- Intentional faith formation efforts
- Participation in extended trips such as the National Catholic Youth Conference, leadership camps, service trips, and World Youth Day
- Participation and involvement in the ministries of liturgy
- Participation in retreats
- Service involvement¹²

The third practice found in the congregations by the *Spirit* project is “custom designed, integrated models” of youth ministry. Communities seized opportunities that were uniquely possible in their context. One example of this was the youth leadership model employed by a rural Catholic parish that involved older youth in leadership of youth ministry and catechetical programs.¹³

In the analysis provided for the report on the Catholic results of the NSYR, Charlotte McCorquodale identified a synergy between the various aspects of youth participation:

. . . we concluded that in terms of Catholic youth who are engaged in their faith, ‘more equals more,’ meaning that when Catholic youth participate in some youth programs, they are more likely to participate in others.¹⁴

Catechesis that Connects

Further research explored the relationship between religious experiences and faith learning as youth experience catechesis and grow in discipleship. Carol Lytch describes this dynamic in the book that reports her research titled, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*. Religious experience includes moments of faith connection while participating in intentional spiritual and religious programs, but it also encompasses everyday experiences that are seen in the light of faith. Lytch describes socialization as something that encompasses learning about the faith tradition and belonging to the tradition. She experienced these elements as linked in the process of faith growth:

. . . socialization conditions persons to have religious experiences by providing them with the symbols, stories, and practices to use for ‘sifting’ their experiences and interpreting them as religious.¹⁵

The *Youth Ministry and Spirituality* project, led by Mark Yaconelli and Michael Hryniuk, identified specific spiritual practices as having immense potential in providing youth with religious experience that is grounded in tradition. These practices include developing a sense of Sabbath, engaging youth in contemplative prayer, teaching youth skills for discernment and welcoming youth through profound hospitality. Underlying these individual practices is the dimension of youth apprenticeship in the Christian life.

Young persons are attracted to and learn the faith from adults who are spiritually alive. Spirit-led ministry to youth focused on the disciplines of the spiritual life as well as the accompaniment of young people by adults who are spiritually mature can lead to a profound and sustainable relationship to Jesus Christ.¹⁶

One way to be intentional about connecting religious experience with socialization is to connect faith learning with other aspects of youth ministry and involvement in parish life. Using this method, youth experience formation in Christian



teachings on justice before and after providing direct service. Some youth learn about worship before engaging in liturgical ministries. Other youth learn about specific faith and Scripture themes about leadership prior to becoming part of the youth ministry core team.

This method of learning matches with ideas developed by Dr. Malcolm Knowles about androgogy, which is his term for the teaching methodology for adults. Dr. Knowles challenges common assumptions about education:

(Many educators believe that) . . . if we simply pour enough knowledge into people: 1) they will turn out to be good people, and 2) they will know how to make use of their knowledge . . . we must define the mission of education as to produce competent people—people who are able to apply their knowledge under changing conditions . . .¹⁷

Using the principles of androgogy, we direct learning to close the gap between what the learners now know and what they need to know in order to do what they want to be able to do. Providing connected learning motivates youth to learn the faith because there is something that they want to do to which this learning is connected. This style of faith learning also helps youth become lifelong faith learners because they see the connections between faith and action.

Michael Theisen, director of membership services for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, conducted research in the Diocese of Rochester that reinforced this style of learning. In their research they found that one of the most effective adolescent faith formation strategies was actually the Vacation Bible School program in a community that involved adolescents each year as team members. These youth learned key Scripture and faith themes each year in preparation for leading children through this week of study and celebration of faith.

Many of the programs that they identified as effective had similar characteristics:

Effective Faith Formation Programs

- Creatively and fully engage young people in the learning process, often as teachers or
- peer leaders
- Are intense and necessitate relationship building among the participants
- Often offer something back to the community

- Utilize the gifts of young people and actively involve the whole person (head, heart, and hands)¹⁸

Within this varied research, a pattern emerges concerning the catechetical journey of adolescents that connects religious experiences, education in the faith tradition, and growth in commitment within the faith community. These elements provide mutual support for each other as youth grow in faith in the context of community.

Movements in Fostering Faith Growth and Commitment

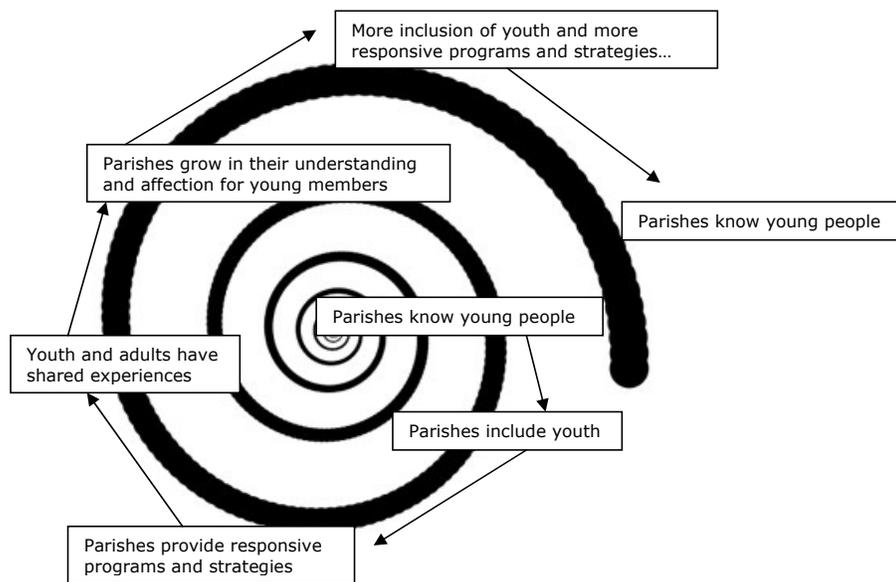
In one example, a young person participates in a spiritual retreat and learns about practices of prayer and liturgy. These experiences lead to renewed participation in liturgy with her family

and involvement in ministries of the parish, which provides for new experiences and faith learning. In another case, a youth may experience a deepening sense of belonging through participation with their family in parish events which leads to involvement in a youth service event that includes catechesis about Catholic social teachings.

Learning about Faith Learning

Communities that are effective in forming faith in adolescents recognize their role as faith witnesses and provide for adolescent catechesis using dynamic faith learning approaches. The team for the *Generations of Faith* project surveyed learning techniques, theory, and practice across the field of education and compared these findings with dynamic faith learning in parish communities. The following three principles summarize what

Diagram 1



Pattern for Parishes Growing in Knowledge and Inclusion of Youth

Footnote:

Diagram is similar to one that is also contained in: Thomas East, *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*. (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 2004), page 11.

this project has been learning about dynamic faith learning from communities across the nation.

Principle 1

*Effective Faith Formation helps youth enter into the **experience of living faith**.*¹⁹

- Engages them **experientially**—head, heart, and lifestyles—in the learning activity, providing them with direct, first-hand experiences.
- Respects and incorporates their **experience** in the learning activity.
- Engages them in **real-world learning** and **application**, making the connection between learning and life, and faith and life.

This principle addresses three key aspects for utilizing experience within faith learning. First, the learning process should be experiential, allowing youth to put themselves completely into the learning process and providing youth with an experience of faith. Second, catechists should access the lived experience of the adolescent and help them to name and claim these experiences as they learn and grow in faith. Third, ministry leaders need to help youth apply what they are learning to their everyday choices and situations.

Principle 2

*Effective faith formation uses a variety of methods which **engage the senses**.*

- Incorporates a variety of **multi-sensory** methods to engage the whole person, such as art, drama, music, dance, storytelling, media, prayer, rituals.
- Engages them in **construction, discovery, and exploration** of the topic or concept.

This principle reminds us of the importance of engaging the senses and addressing a variety of learning styles. Ministry leaders are also challenged to move the faith learner from being a passive listener to being someone who is helping uncover and discover the faith content.

Principle 3

*Effective faith formation builds a **faith learning community**.*

- Utilizes **collaborative** and **group-centered** formats for study, inquiry, activities, and sharing.
- Provides an **environment** that is characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and inquiry.

- Is **participative** and **interactive**, actively engaging them in the learning process.

In the *National Directory for Catechesis*, the United States Catholic Bishops describe the importance of community within faith formation:

[Effective faith formation] Involves group participation in an environment that is characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and care, so that young people can hear and respond to God’s call (fostering the freedom to search and question, to express one’s own point of view, and to respond in faith to that call).²⁰

Youth are naturally going to learn and grow in faith more comfortably in a community where they feel safe, accepted, and valued. This principle reminds catechists of the importance of building community while promoting faith growth and learning.

Summary and Conclusion

The following directions for adolescent faith formation summarize this survey of best practices identified in this essay:

- Parish communities have a profound impact on faith formation through their lived theology and their involvement of youth.
- Communities should seize opportunities to involve youth in learning Christian practices, in learning as part of the intergenerational community and in being mentored in the spiritual life by adults of lively faith.
- Youth ministry should place evangelization and faith formation at the heart of its efforts.
- This priority is put into action by engaging the parish community, supporting families and providing age-specific catechesis to youth in a variety of ways.
- Specific practices of youth ministry and religious education have special potential for helping youth grow in faith understanding and commitment. This includes connecting catechesis with ministry, leadership and service involvements.
- One of the most vital aspects of dynamic catechesis is the vibrancy of faith held by the person who is sharing faith with youth. Special attention is needed in the formation and spiritual support of youth catechists and ministry leaders.
- Dynamic faith learning utilizes youth’s experience,

engages them in a learning community, and implements a variety of methods and models.

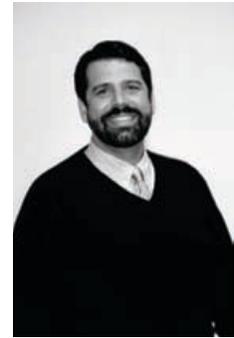
By looking at these parish practices, we see that there are many places where catechesis with adolescents is flourishing. Amidst changing pastoral conditions and cultural transition, faith communities are finding ways to catechize youth. Christian Smith challenges leaders to use what we know to do the work needed with youth in our communities:

Parents, pastors, ministers, religious educators, and congregational leaders concerned with youth need simply to *better engage and challenge* the youth already at their disposal, to work better to help make faith a more active and important part of their lives. The problem is not that youth won't come to church (most will), or that they hate church (few do), or that they don't want to listen to religious ministers or mature mentoring adults (they will and do).²¹

Communities are using varied methods to engage and challenge young people. Some of these methods are innovative while others are tried and true. The common link among these communities is the passion, zeal, and leadership demonstrated in the variety of vibrant, integrated efforts. This energy will drive continued diligence, innovation, and faithfulness, which will lead to renewed practices and examples of dynamic ministry. Through these efforts, the story of adolescent catechesis will continue to unfold as faithful disciples are compelled to share faith and live faith in ways new and old.

About the Author

Tom East is the director of the Center for Ministry Development and the project coordinator for youth ministry services. He is also the national coordinator for the Certificate Program in Youth Ministry Studies and teaches the Principles of Youth Ministry and Prayer and Worship courses. Over the past two years, he has coordinated the Symposium on Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes project. Tom has served as editor and author for *Celebrate Youth* (CMD), a parish youth ministry implementation kit, and *Confirming Disciples* (CMD), a high school confirmation program. Tom holds a master's of arts degree in religious studies from Mt. St. Mary's College in Los Angeles. Tom lives with his wife, Lois, and three daughters, Kaelyn, Michelle, and Kristen, in Gig Harbor, Washington.



Endnotes

It Is About the Parish

¹Thomas East, *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* (Winona MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004),10.

²John Roberto, "The Spirit of Youth Ministry—Utilizing Faith Assets to Nurture Youth of Vital Faith," *Youth Ministry Access Journal Article* (Naugatuck CT: Center for Ministry Development, 2006) 3.

Note: The Spirit of Youth Ministry Project has also been referred to as "The Exemplary Youth Ministry Project." This project is directed by Dr. Roland Martinson. Additional information may be found at: www.exemplaryyouthministry.org. Publications to be available in 2008.

³Roberto, 4.

⁴Quotation is drawn from report submitted by Dorothy Bass for the "Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth, Lilly Endowment Inc." (Indianapolis IN, November 7-8, 2006) 17. See also: *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, (Nashville TN: Upper Room Books, 2003).

⁵Ibid.

⁶See: Mariette Martineau, Joan Weber, & Leif Kehrwald, *Intergenerational Faith Formation—All Ages Learning Together* (New London CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2008) and John Roberto, *Becoming a Church of Lifelong Learners* (New London CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006).

⁷Ken Johnson-Mondragon, editor, *Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens—Pastoral and Strategies Inspired by the National Study of Youth and Religion* (Stockton CA: Instituto Fe y Vida, 2007), 345.

⁸For additional information, see: Ken Johnson-Mondragon, editor, *Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens—Pastoral and Strategies Inspired by the National Study of Youth and Religion* (Stockton CA: Instituto Fe y Vida, 2007), 332-337.

⁹East, 32. A diagram identifying the cycle of deepening relationships is available on page 11.

Youth Ministry Matters

¹⁰Ibid, 44.

¹¹Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 261.

¹²See: East 43-56.

¹³See: Roberto, *Spirit of Youth Ministry*, 3.

¹⁴Charlotte McCorquodale, "Identifying the Essential Questions for Successful Ministry with Catholic Youth," *Seminary Journal*, 13:2, Fall 2007 (Washington DC: National Catholic Education Association), 11.

Catechesis That Connects

¹⁵Carol Lytch, *Choosing Church—What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), 62.

¹⁶Quotation is drawn from report submitted by Michael Hryniuk for the "Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth, Lily Endowment Inc." (Indianapolis IN, November 7-8, 2006), 50. See also: Mark Yaconelli, *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry*, (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2007). This insight about the vibrancy of adult faith is echoed in the Effective Practices research. See: East, 44, 64-65, 74-75.

¹⁷Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education—From Pedagogy to Andragogy* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Cambridge Adult Education, 1988), 18-19.

¹⁸Michael Theisen, "Adolescent Catechesis Today: On the Road to Transformation" (Washington, D.C.: National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 2007. www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/Theisenarticle.pdf. Accessed 4.10.07) 5.

Learning about Faith Learning

¹⁹These principles were developed from findings about effective learning from the Generations of Faith Project (Naugatuck, Conn.: Center for Ministry Development, 2006) by Leif Kehrwald, Mariette Martineau, John Roberto, and Joan Weber. See: www.generationsoffaith.org.

²⁰*National Directory for Catechesis*, 201.

Summary and Conclusion

²¹Quotation is drawn from report submitted by Christian Smith for the "Consultation on the Christian Formation of Youth, Lily Endowment Inc." (Indianapolis, November 7-8, 2006), 84.