

# Youth Ministry in Today's Church

Connecting Modern Teens to an Ancient Faith



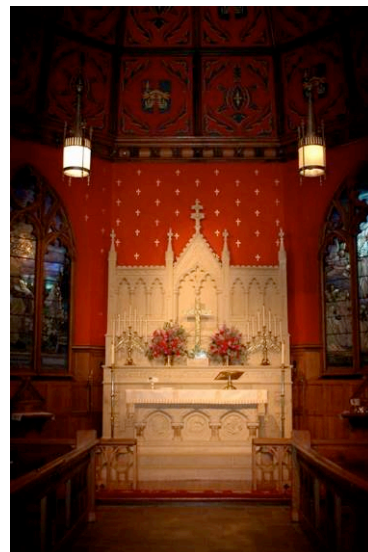
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## Building on a great past

After more than a decade of publishing and distributing the *Journey to Adulthood (J2A)*, the staff at LeaderResources is taking stock and re-visioning youth ministry. We have trained hundreds of youth leaders and watched thousands of churches transform their approach to their youth. We have grown the initial 350 pages of J2A with great concepts and about 50 lesson plans into 1500+ pages with over 150 lesson plans and a wealth of youth ministry resources. And we've been privileged to see the powerful impact this program has had on the life and ministries of congregations across the country and around the world.



But we also know that culture is always evolving and the times are changing. We believe that now is the time to revisit how we do youth ministry in today's church. J2A has provided us with incredibly valuable gifts and a rock-solid theological and practical base. J2A helped bring a new model of relational youth ministry to the church and we want to build on that base and move to the next level.

Between the four of us, we have parish, diocesan, regional and national experience as well as parenting experience, seminary educations, psychology and education degrees, experience in school systems and 40+ years of youth ministry. Two of us are engaged in doctoral work – one in education and one on the post-modern church. So in addition to our experience with J2A, we are bringing our academic research and study to this re-visioning.

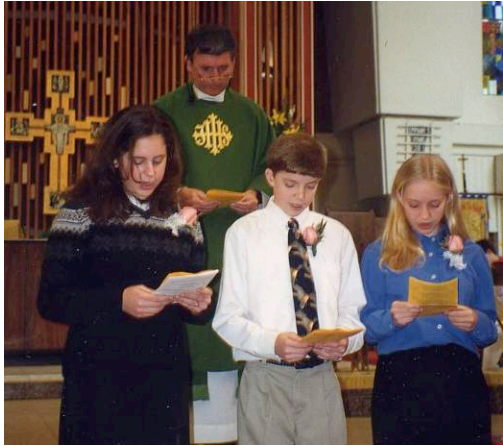
As we look at the history of J2A, we recognize three central components:

## 1. Relational Youth Ministry

The first central component of J2A is the importance of relational youth ministry. This concept has been hugely transformative for youth leaders and the larger church. Youth ministry is not about entertaining young people – nor is it just about making sure they simply “know the facts” of the faith. Following the example of Jesus, it is about being in relationship with our young people. When you really look at it, faith is *caught* more than it is *taught*. J2A has given us a framework to create space where both the youth and the adults can naturally build deeper relationships with God and each other in Christ.

## 2. Rites of Passage

The second major component of J2A is the way it is structured around Rites of Passage that mark the transition of young people from childhood to adulthood. This transition is a process, not a single event and the Journey to Adulthood program spends six years moving teens through the three stages of a classic Rite of Passage: separation, initiation, and reincorporation. This is accomplished through both the structure of the weekly lessons, and through various special liturgies that mark progress along the way.



The huge popularity of the “Rite 13 Liturgy” (actually entitled “Celebration of Manhood & Womanhood”) is a clear indication that this rite of passage “rings true” for people of all ages – not just youth and their parents, but also for many of the parishioners who gather to witness this important transitional rite. The same can also be said of the Holy Pilgrimage which is designed to happen after the fourth year of the program. This sacred journey has the potential to transform not just the young pilgrims who travel, but also the congregation who has sent them forth. Our

churches have discovered the importance of being intentional about celebrating major steps in one’s personal and faith formation. And they have learned the process of letting go, separating from the past and spending time with God as they begin to embrace the future.

## 3. Spiritual formation

The third major component of J2A is spiritual formation. In the past, youth ministry focused on education and entertainment. An effective youth leader taught young people about the faith, the Bible and the Christian life – and made sure they had a good time. Often this youth leader had a magnetic charisma that drew young people in and kept them entertained. But too many churches found that when their young “youth guru” left the church, the youth group fell apart.

J2A has re-introduced the church to the importance of everyday, ordinary adults sharing their journey with young people and together developing an authentic, growing spiritual life. They have learned to pray, to share their faith with each other and they have traveled to sacred places where others have found God and been able to rest in that place – seeking God, learning to wait on the Lord and to be in God’s presence rather than just doing “good works”. They have deepened their relationship with God as well as learning about God. The lesson learned in J2A has been that our work as those who care for youth is not just to amuse or hold them close for these few years, but to actively equip them for adulthood; an adulthood where their deep spiritual lives and their ability to engage the world joyfully and purposefully, enables them to be a part of God’s healing presence in the world.

## Hold onto what is good

We believe these three core elements from J2A -- Relational Youth Ministry, Rites of Passage and Spiritual Formation -- are all essential for any effective youth ministry today. We encourage every youth leader to embrace and incorporate them into their life and ministry with youth. J2A provides a great framework for including these elements, but it is certainly not the only program to have discovered these elements. These pieces can be incorporated into any process, used with any curriculum and work in groups of any size or denomination.

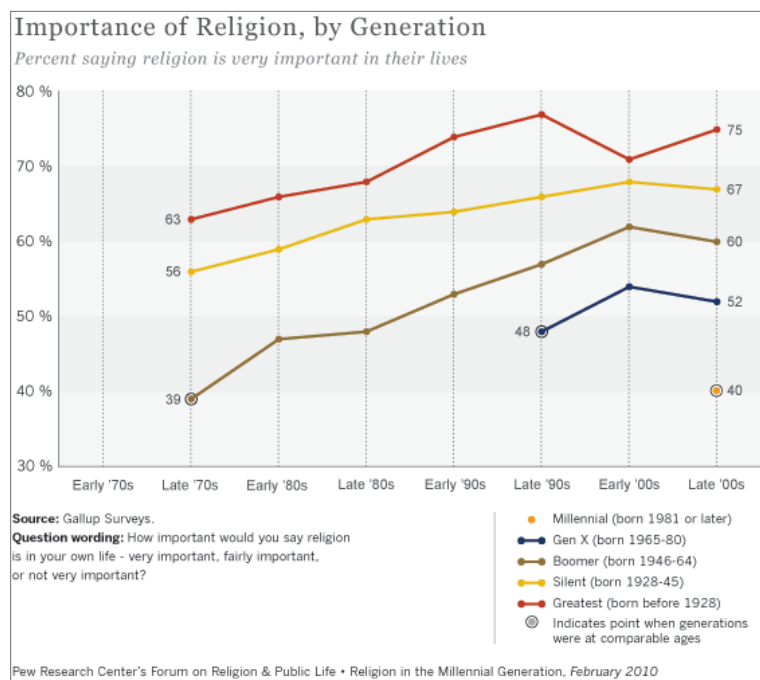
These core elements are really more about *how* we do youth ministry than they are a “program” of youth ministry. They are the good pieces we, as a church, have gained in the past 10+ years and we should hold onto them!

## What’s next?

Even with the success of J2A, we recognize that life is changing for many modern families and our churches need to adapt to those changes if we want to continue to keep youth and their families engaged. Parents have always wanted success for young people in their adult lives, but over the last several years, the industry of college applications and acceptance has caused a shift in values and priorities. We live in an extremely competitive world and parents and schools expect children to be involved in extra-curricular activities that might give them an edge in college applications. And because time is at such a premium in our society, schools and clubs now often schedule sports events or practice sessions on Sunday mornings.

Another major challenge we face is the continuing secularization of our culture. Many families use weekends as a time to travel or engage in recreational activities. Meanwhile, an ongoing commitment to a faith community is declining with each decade so parents are less committed to attending church themselves and therefore are unwilling or unable to persuade their youth to attend. And with “none of the above” being the fastest growing faith group in the United States, youth and their parents have little cultural support for church attendance.

The end result is that most of our youth (and their parents) hold to what Kenda Creasy Dean calls a “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”<sup>1</sup>



Analyzing the data gathered by the National Study of Youth and Religion,<sup>2</sup> she outlines the basic beliefs of our youth.

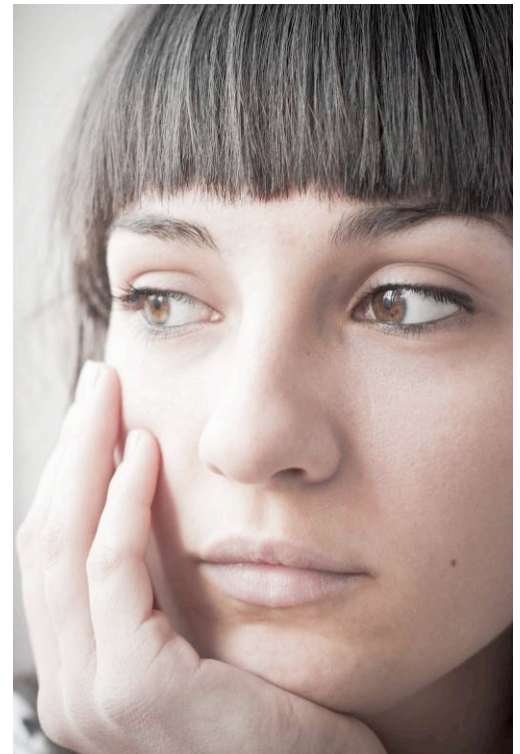
Today's young people believe in:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and most world religions.
- The central goal in life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

This is the faith of our youth. You might notice that almost none of this is Christianity. There is nothing about Jesus or the Holy Spirit. There is no belief in the concepts of sin and redemption. There is no call to bring God's love to others or serve others in Jesus' name. There is no sense of life having meaning or of people being created by God and called into a vocation – a life in relationship with God and a ministry given and blessed by God. None of these core practices and beliefs of the Christian faith are present in the life or beliefs of most of our youth.

### **Teenagers have a positive but bland view of religion**

The problem is not that teenagers are opposed to religion. The same study found that they had a fairly positive view of religion – they just don't really give it much thought. It isn't important to them. In general, they think religion has much to offer people and the youth who do attend church tend to feel good about their particular congregation, even if they may be critical of organized religion as a whole. But the reason teens don't have extremely negative feeling about religion or aren't showing outright rebellion against all things religious is because they simply don't care about it very much. They aren't even "seekers" – trying to find a religious identity or exploring different religious traditions. Religion simply doesn't impact them much one way or the other. Their view of God is as a lifeguard (rescue), butler (provider), therapist (feel good) or guidance counselor (decision/direction) – a God who watches from the sidelines until called upon or who offers guidance and support when needed.<sup>3</sup> But there is no encounter with a God that is transformative. And Jesus barely gets a mention – he is basically just a "good guy" who taught people about God.



## Teenagers are theologically inarticulate

The study's authors found that teenagers could and would talk with them about almost any topic. But when it came to religion, teenagers were remarkably silent or inarticulate. They don't have a clear enough understanding of their faith or their own beliefs to express them to another person. They don't have enough opportunities to talk about those topics in a safe setting to help them develop a vocabulary and a level of comfort that makes conversation about theological topics easier.

We need to realize that the religious language we use is no longer translating for them and/or we are not teaching them the language of our faith. The fact that our children hear religious language does not mean they understand or engage in it well enough to use it in meaningful conversation. The basic language of our faith has become a foreign language to our youth, and if we're honest, to a lot of our adults. We live in a world where religion has become as polarized as politics and far too many people use snippets of faith or scripture to prescribe overly simplistic solutions to complex theological and social issues. We have few current-day role models who can articulate a modern understanding of an authentic and life-changing engagement of creeds, texts, prayer and spiritual reflection in ways that encourage the use of religious language and heartfelt discussion about current issues.

## Parents matter

In fact, in most cases, the same moralistic therapeutic deism we see in teenagers is also the faith of their parents. One of the conclusions that overwhelmed every other finding in the study was "parents matter most when it comes to the religious formation of their children."



that

While the rest of us (youth leaders, clergy, grandparents, etc.) are influential, the most important predictors of teenagers' religious lives is the faith and faith practices of their parents. What this means is that not only do we have youth who are only "almost Christian," we have a generation or two of parents with the same beliefs. That leads us to our first major change: Youth ministry today must involve parents.

Parents have little (or no) energy to insist that their youth come to church. In fact, they are often the reason their youth are going somewhere with the family or enrolled in some program. So our first task needs to be focus on parents. Fortunately, many parents are extremely dedicated to their children (hence the nickname "helicopter parents"). They will do things for their child that they might not do otherwise. So our first task needs to be to convince parents that participation in church will benefit their child.

## Motivation

Fortunately, the same national study on religion and youth gives us that data. 40% of youth find religion important enough to attend church (even if it doesn't have much impact on them or their faith). Only 8% of these youth who attend church are "highly devoted" to their faith. These youth are doing "much better in life" than less religious teens: they are more likely to do well in school have positive relationships with their families, a positive outlook on life, etc.

This is the "good news" that parents need to hear: participating in church improves their child's chances of doing well in life!

Yes, we know that isn't a good theological reason for why youth should attend church or youth group. But we are talking about *motivators* – things that will help parents begin to see church involvement as important. And to do that, you have to start where people are, not where you wish they were!

Most parents are focused on doing what is best for their child – and right now they are convinced that attending a sports event, going skiing with the family or even just catching up on sleep is more important than going to church. Our first job has to be to convince them that participating in church will have positive benefits for their child. Then we can move on to the theological principles that we hope will continue to motivate them once they are engaged as part of the church community.

Our new **Center for Youth Ministry** will begin to provide resources to help you engage parents in youth ministry. The first step is to present them with data that is persuasive. The second step is to invite them in. Unlike J2A, which recommends that parents *not* be youth leaders, we are recommending that ALL parents be part of the youth ministry team in some way. If youth are primarily formed by their parent's faith, then parents need to be with their children in the faith community. Plus, this is a stealth strategy – many adults won't attend adult education sessions, BUT if they are leading the youth group sessions, they will learn what they need to teach.

So build a strong parent group and use it as a way to do adult faith formation as well as youth ministry. Don't call it adult education; call it Parents of Teens & Tweens (POTTs) or something along those lines. Some parents will be youth leaders, others will be "supporters" who gather supplies or help with logistics. But this group is also where the youth leaders can practice the lesson before they lead it, wrestle with any questions that arise, think collectively about what

The 31% of all 12<sup>th</sup> graders who attend religious services weekly and the 30% of high school seniors for whom religion is "very important" are significantly more likely than non-attenders and non-religious youth to:

- Have positive attitudes toward themselves
- Enjoy life as much as anyone
- Feel like their lives are useful
- Feel hopeful about their future
- Feel satisfied with their lives
- Feel like they have something of which to be proud
- Feel good to be alive
- Feel like life is meaningful
- Enjoy being in school

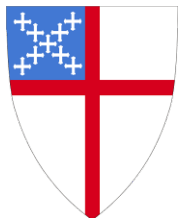
<http://www.youthandreligion.org/>

to do and gather information on what youth are saying at home... while also easily engaging the gathered adults in a type of theological reflection and sharing. This group team of parents and other adults leads the youth ministry program – guided by clergy or professional staff.

## Back to the basics

We have a serious case of what one of our DMin classmates called “Jesus Deficit Disorder.” Most of our youth, and their parents, do not have a relationship with Jesus and may not even know much about Jesus. Or, to be frank, they don’t believe much of what the church has traditionally said about Jesus. They have not encountered the Risen Christ and their lives have not been touched, much less transformed by him. Faith has been reduced only to beliefs, and they aren’t even sure they believe what the church teaches. We don’t need our teens to memorize doctrinal belief. We need to create environments where youth can *experience God*. After all, what we’re really talking about is a relationship with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

This may mean that the adult leaders and parents need to start with their own faith experience. You can’t share what you don’t have... and you can’t create an environment or talk about an experience you haven’t had. Find people in your congregation who can talk about an authentic encounter with the Holy and ask them to share their story. Ask Christians from other churches to share their faith story – some of them may be more comfortable doing that than you are and it can help get the conversation going. Just make sure you don’t invite someone who is inauthentic or pushy or you’ll turn off your adults as well as your teens! Your clergy, diocesan (or other regional) staff or members of religious orders are other potential witnesses. The **Center for Youth Ministry** will be developing resources to help you with this as well and you can join in conversations with other youth leaders there.



Those of us in the Episcopal Church have an especially challenging time before us – Episcopal youth are the lowest on almost all of the key indicators: church, Sunday School and youth group participation; belief in God, life after death, miracles, etc.; the importance of faith in daily life, closeness or commitment to God; reading the Bible, praying, having a spiritual experience; talking about faith at home, school or church. In all of these, Episcopal youth are only about half as likely to be as “religious” as the average Christian teenager. And they are many times more likely to see the adults and teenagers at their church as hypocrites (35% vs. 2% for Lutherans or 8% of United Methodists).<sup>4</sup>

In these same studies, it appears as though Episcopal parents are also less-than-enthusiastic about the church’s engagement with teens and families: 62% of parents in general feel their church has been helpful to them in raising their teens, but only 47% of Episcopal parents agree. Episcopal parents also are the least likely to say that their church makes youth ministry a top priority. So Episcopalians have the most challenging work ahead!

## Be authentic

Finally, it is absolutely essential that adults be totally authentic with youth – you cannot foster relationships otherwise. We are not advocating that you disclose personal information inappropriately, but it is imperative that you not pretend to know more, believe more or understand more than you do. If you don't know the answer to something, say so. Say what you can about your faith, your relationship with God in a way that is honest.

But practice first with other adults and get feedback. We actually had a Vestry member say at a retreat, "I come to church because I like the community and I think it will be good for my kids but this 'Jesus stuff' I'm not so sure about." That was honest, but probably not helpful to say to a youth group. On the other hand, it isn't honest to make up something either – and teens will pick that up in a heartbeat. Better to say, "I really don't know what I'd say about that... let me think about it." And then come back to it next week.

The good news is that if you are being intentional about faith formation with your adult leaders and parents, hopefully they become able to say things like "I believe my faith has changed, and will continue to grow and change over the years. There are basic things I say in the creeds because I know they are the faith of the church. Of *my* church. And as I grow into different experiences and relationships, I see how these beliefs are relevant to my life."



Get your adults (parents) to practice with each other. Ask questions and brainstorm a list of questions youth are likely to ask. Look at the lessons you plan to use and think about what issues might emerge. See who can authentically answer questions from a posture of faith and yet not sound "fake" and have that person available to respond to questions of faith that others might be nervous about. If your adults can't talk about

their faith or don't know what they believe, now is the time to start that conversation with them. The **Center for Youth Ministry** will point you to resources you can use to help your adults deepen their own faith life.

## Change it!

Too often we believe that there is one "magic bullet" – the perfect program or the perfect person who can come in and fix everything. In this age of rapid change and immense diversity, this is an increasingly flawed strategy. Give up looking for the perfect program or youth guru.

Listen to your youth. Pay attention to what’s happening in your group. And then change it – pick the resources that fit your group at this moment.

There isn’t any author or company who can put together a national program that will fit your needs perfectly. We can and will give you a library of resources, but you have to pull out the lesson or activity or liturgy that fits your group in the moment and be willing to be flexible.

That’s part of being “in relationship” with your youth – what you do next is planned ahead of time but then adapted according to the needs of your youth and the journey your group is on.

### **We can help!**

The **Center for Youth Ministry (CYM)** is designed to make adaptations easy. You have access to several complete youth ministry programs encompassing hundreds of lesson plans.



In addition, you can log into the website 24/7 and instantly download different confirmation programs, retreat designs, special liturgies, mission projects, and more. Over time we’ll be adding new resources and ways for you to share your experience with other youth leaders. But we want to encourage youth leaders to start using the resources that meets their needs – no matter which “program” has those resources.

This new CYM is also a great way to share your gifts with a larger community. If you have created a fun game, written a great lesson or planned a successful event and would like to share it, this is a wonderful way to do that -- and you will also be able to benefit from the experiences of other colleagues as well!

One of the ongoing challenges for adults who work with youth is that there aren’t many places to really LEARN how to do youth ministry. An awful lot of it is on-the-job training and a lot of new youth leaders do a lot of “flying by the seat of their pants”! It’s great if you can go to a retreat or conference on youth ministry, but in these busy and economically-challenging times, fewer and fewer people are able to do that. But this new Center is one of the gifts of technology... here is a virtual place where adults who care about youth ministry will be able to connect with other adults who feel the same way.

You will be able to download and use a wide variety of resources, as well as take advantage of practical tools other people have created -- sample calendars, letters, ready-to-use event publicity and more!

Let's face it... agreeing to lead a youth group can be challenging even though it can also be immensely rewarding. That is why we are spending much of the initial resources in this launch of the CYM on adult engagement and learning. If adults care about their faith, and can be examples of a living Christian making hard choices and being a part of their Church community in a way that is fun, meaningful, and relevant, the teens will see that, and trust that, and want to be a part of what you have to offer the church.

There is a place for everyone. We can't all be perfect "zen" youth leaders, or hilarious joke tellers, or practical (and much-needed) administrators of programs and calendars. But together as a community we have what it takes to nurture our young people in this Christian community and help them follow Christ. Together, we can each make the time to discern why and how God has called us to serve Jesus in these youth, and then step boldly into their lives.

We are grateful for you. The work you do is of utmost importance for the ongoing good of the church and the world. There is a popular saying: **"Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes."** And we in the Church need to adopt this idea – we need to hear and develop authentic voices of faith who speak the truth, even if we feel ill-equipped or our voice shakes.

After all, we have life-changing Good News that the world desperately needs to hear.

God is with you. God is calling you.  
Go!

**For more about The Center for Youth Ministry, visit**  
[www.LeaderResources.org/CYM](http://www.LeaderResources.org/CYM)

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<sup>1</sup> *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, Oxford Press, p. 14

<sup>2</sup> A massive study on adolescent spirituality in the USA conducted in 2003-2005. <http://www.youthandreligion.org/research>

<sup>3</sup> *Almost Christian*, p. 18

<sup>4</sup> *Portraits of American Teenagers*, a report from the National Study of Youth and Religion p. 46ff; download from website at [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org).