

Balancing Spiritual Growth, Learning, and Fun

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What does spiritual growth mean?

Youth workers will answer this question in a variety of ways. For some, it will mean being able to pray the Lord's Prayer and recite the Apostles' Creed. For some, it will mean always having an element of worship in youth activities. For some, it will mean intentionally leading youth to make commitments to Christ and the church. All of those can be important, depending on where your youth are.

For all groups, though, spiritual growth is closely related to faith maturity (see Question 51). This means that youth are growing in a vertical relationship with God through Jesus Christ and in a horizontal relationship of service with others. The Letter to the Ephesians says it like this: "...until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Youth are not going to realize full maturity during adolescence; that would be an unrealistic expectation. However, they should begin to show signs of moving toward maturity.

Ministry with youth needs to include opportunities for them to grow toward maturity in their relationship with God. Does your worship invite them to relate with God through Jesus Christ? Do your study sessions help them grow in knowledge of God and of God's ways in the world? John Wesley referred to the way we work toward this dimension of spiritual growth as works of piety. They include

- prayer;
- Bible study;
- congregational worship;
- participation in the Lord's Supper;
- Christian conversation.

Do you include all of these elements in your youth ministry? By Christian conversation, Wesley meant being in a small group focused on growth in faith maturity and providing both support and the call to accountability. Do your conversations with one another, for example, offer opportunities for both support and calls to accountability? How often do you engage in prayer and Bible study? Do you encourage regular worship with the congregation? Or do you disparage that as big church and assume youth are not interested? Contemporary worship services for youth have their place, but not as a ministry that continues to isolate them from the congregation.

Ministry with youth needs to include opportunities for them to grow toward maturity in their relationships with other people and with the world. This horizontal growth toward maturity begins in youth group, Sunday school class, and local church and then reaches out toward the world. It includes fellowship, community, mission, and service. John Wesley often referred to these as works of mercy. They include

- feeding the hungry;
- clothing the naked;
- visiting the sick and those in prison;
- and responding in other ways to human need.

Do you include all these in your youth ministry? How often do you think about fellowship and community building as ways to mature in faith? How often do you provide opportunities for your youth to engage in direct, hands-on ministry with others? Do you do that regularly, or is service restricted to the annual mission trip? In addition, works of mercy sometimes involve moving to works of justice: actively working to change the system that allows people to be hungry, homeless, and in need in the first place.

Spiritual growth involves both works of piety and works of mercy. Prayer and Bible study lead us to minister to others. Ministry to others drives us back to prayer and Scripture for strength to go on with ministry to others.



The youth of our church are suspicious of anything labeled as Christian because they associate Christianity with the fundamentalism pervasive in the larger culture. They believe they know all about Christianity, when they actually know little. How can we share with them an authentic Christianity and not run them off?

One of the tragedies of the church in our time is that we have allowed fundamentalism to seize the agenda and define what the church is and believes. The tragedy lies in the reality that fundamentalism sees all issues as either-or and does not allow for diversity in opinion or action. One of the historic strengths of the church has been the freedom to disagree and work together in spite of disagreement. We air our differences together, work them out if possible, and continue to do God's mission in the world, even when we disagree.

For example, look at a current hot issue: Is it absolutely necessary to believe that abortion is murder in order to be a Christian? Can Christians honestly disagree on the moral and ethical issues about abortion and reproductive rights and still be Christian? Can they disagree and work together to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and so forth? Can they disagree without reading one another out of the church?

Behind this question is the need for an alternative vision of what it means to be a Christian. How do we offer youth another way to love God and live their faith? One way, of course, is by personal example. If adult leaders are clearly Christian without being exclusive or dogmatic about their faith, they offer a model of an alternative to fundamentalism.

Another way to offer an alternative vision is programming. What if you met with a team of youth and adults and asked the question, "What is there about fundamentalism that turns us off so much? Is it an insistence of a literal interpretation of the Bible? Or is it the insistence that we believe certain things in order to be Christian? What is it?" Once you identify those issues, ask the team to help you identify how to engage youth in discussions about alternatives to fundamentalism. Engage your pastor in the conversation. He or she may be able to address some of the issues in preaching and definitely should be able to suggest resources and other background information for program building.



Where do we draw the line between wanting youth to enjoy coming to church and pushing them to grow beyond fellowship?

Two risks are implicit in this question. The first is the one we worry about the most: How can we help youth who come just for the fun to grow in faith? If we push them to grow in faith, will they quit coming? We certainly do not want to lose anyone. The second implicit risk is the opposite: If we cater to the youth who come only to have fun so that they will keep coming, will we lose the youth who want to grow in faith? The answer to the second question is probably yes.

So, where is the line, and how do we walk it? My personal bias is to risk losing the kids who come just for the fun so that we do not lose the ones we have a chance to help grow as disciples. But there are some ways we can accommodate both groups, up to a point.

Some of those youth who seem to be coming just for the fun can be enticed into growth without even being aware of it. Look for ways of learning and growing that will attract their attention. For example, one pastor who was dealing with this problem discovered that showing his slides of the Holy Land and talking about biblical events through that medium made youth who were there just for the fun want to know more about the Bible. Another adult worker with youth was trying to lead a Lenten session showing the parallels between Psalm 22 and Jesus' crucifixion. He stopped with Psalm 22:1, but one youth who had never shown any interest in the Bible before and was basically the group cut-up grabbed his Bible, read all of Psalm 22, and began to get excited about the parallels. The youth stopped the discussion, which was ready to move elsewhere, and gave a long report on what Psalm 22 said. (He was back to having fun the next week, but he was in a different place, anyway.)

Active learning is another way to engage youth who are there for the fun. They think they are in a game. Then, when it is time to reflect on the game and relate it to faith, they suddenly discover there is something more. Fellowship times that are strictly game nights draw lots of youth who do not seem to care about learning, but most of them will sit quietly for a closing worship time. Somewhere along the way, they are touched.

Youth who are pushing for growth in faith and discipleship, on the other hand, can be accommodated through a series of covenant or Bible study groups that meet at times other than the regular youth meeting time. These youth can then become models for the rest of the group in terms of what faith growth means to them.

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How do we strike a good balance between spiritual growth, learning, and fun?

First, you have to determine what a good balance is and why you want it. The why part is the easiest. A good balance helps youth mature in faith. It is a bit harder to determine what a good balance is. In part, that depends on the age of your group, where they are in faith maturity, and where you feel comfortable leading them. But let's say a good balance would be 33%–33%–34%. How do you strike that balance?

Remember, in a good game plan (or master plan; see Questions 28 and 92), you know that you do not have to do everything in every part of your youth ministry. For example, the heavy emphasis on learning is in what happens on Sunday morning, so you do not have to focus as heavily on learning in your fellowship times. However, you will want to include at least some learning time for youth who come only to fellowship groups.

My personal bias would be to have the fun time segue into learning, perhaps a community-building game that includes both reflection on the game and reflection on how the game relates to Christian faith. I would have a specific time for worship and prayer, with youth assuming as much leadership as they are ready to take. But I would also allow for spontaneous moments when it seems appropriate to stop whatever you are doing and give thanks to God.

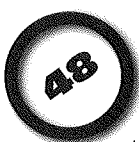
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How do we inspire youth to want to learn about God when they have "more interesting" things on their minds?

You do not have the skills and equipment to compete with most of those things. For example, you cannot compete with the entertainment world. And most youth have personal computers that allow them to do things, both serious and fun, far beyond what the church can offer. One of the things youth think about most is the opposite sex.

One way to deal with the problem of "more interesting" things is to remind yourselves that there are some things only the church can do. One of these is worship. A nearby youth group sets aside the third Sunday of every month as worship night. Youth are in charge of planning and leading the service. Each youth is invited to light a votive candle, put it on the altar as a way of saying "I'm here, God," and then to spend some time in prayer. That night has the best attendance of the month. And the youth who are there only for fun get involved in this worship time.

Out of that kind of experience comes questions that youth raise about God and life. So, some months, that youth group sets aside the fourth Sunday as question time. More than one cut-up has found her or himself asking heavy questions about God in this period.



How do we help youth grow spiritually when so many other activities take up their time?

One of the most important issues with which they deal is the use of time. Youth cannot do everything; they have to make choices. One way we can help them grow spiritually in the light of time pressures is to help them develop good decision-making skills. Another is to help them learn how to set priorities: What is the most important thing for me long-term? What is the most important thing for me this Wednesday night? If youth say something else is more important this Sunday, we have to accept that choice.



How do we have an effective devotional time without losing their interest?

At least two different approaches should be considered here. One of them is ritual, since youth are fascinated by mystery and ritual. The candle-lighting ceremony in Question 47 is a good example. Also effective is the full ritual for Holy Communion (not the shortcut version that many pastors are now using in worship).

A second approach is to invite youth to take leadership in planning and conducting worship. If they have prepared the talk for a previous week, they will listen carefully this week because they know how much effort a friend has put into planning this talk. They want to be respectful of her time and want others to be respectful of their time. This is not just a gimmick to hold interest for the devotional time; it is an important way to help youth grow in faith.



How do we teach prayer to this age group?

Teach prayer by praying in a variety of ways, in order to engage youth. A good way to begin is by having a circle prayer, with each person saying thank you for something or someone. Circle prayers can be expanded to include joys and concerns as well.

As part of worship time, ask for prayer concerns and joys. Many of these will seem trivial compared with the needs of the world, but they are

important to youth. Pray for each of these by name. Yes, this means you will have to take notes while youth are naming concerns. Or, as each concern is named, the entire group can say, in unison, “Hear our prayer, O Lord,” or something similar. Obviously, a prayer naming the concerns will teach youth more about praying, but anything that involves them in prayer is important.

Allow time for silent prayer and/or guided prayers or meditations. Play background music (such as Gregorian chants), put the room in semi-darkness, and use a lot of candles. Youth love ritual and mystery that is typified by music and candles. They can also be encouraged to pray silently during periods of quiet. At first, make these quiet times short, such as two minutes or fewer. After youth become comfortable with quiet, you can stretch out the time (with some groups, even as long as thirty minutes on occasion).

Finally, ask youth to pray aloud. Their prayers will not be polished; in fact, they may be full of “like, you know” and “uh,” but that is all right. The key is that they are praying. Encourage every effort at prayer.

Questions You Didn't Ask



What is all this about faith maturity?

Should we be concerned about it?

How do we make it happen?

At the most basic level, faith maturity is a way of describing what happens when we try to live out the great commandments: to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-31). Jesus' summary of the Torah and the Prophets reminds us that, in faith, there is a vertical dimension of relationship with God and a horizontal dimension of relationship with other people (and with the natural order, the environment). So, yes, this is something about which you should be concerned in your ministry. How does it work?

Faith maturity is also about goals, visions, and dreams for ministry. All of us want numbers because numbers represent people, and we want to reach as many people as possible. But we also want to help them grow in faith and discipleship. So, how do we do that?

John Wesley, the founder of what became The United Methodist Church, said that moving toward maturity means engaging in works of piety and works of mercy. By works of piety, he meant

- prayer, both private and public;
- Bible study;
- regular worship with the congregation;
- regular participation in the Lord's Supper;
- Christian conversation, by which he meant being involved in a small group where people both support one another in their faith struggles and hold one another accountable when they are less than faithful.

By works of mercy, Wesley meant such things as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and those in prison, and generally doing good to all those around us. He considered those works to be something that his followers did on a regular, ongoing basis, not just once in a while. In our day, that includes working in soup kitchens, being on mission work teams, repairing homes in the community, working on Habitat for Humanity houses, or volunteering at the local homeless shelter or the community hospital.

Today, we might want to add a third dimension: works of justice. These are the actions in which we engage that seek to change the social, political, and economic systems that cause people to be hungry, cold, naked, homeless, sick. A part of works of justice involves teaching youth about biblical concepts of justice and how they apply to real life. Another part could involve writing letters about an impending political decision that affects the lives of people in your area. A third might be working to establish a youth activity center that would attract high-risk youth and offer them an alternative to destructive behaviors.