

## CHAPTER 2

## Images for Youth Ministry

Society is awash in images created in part by the print media, the film industry, and television. "The images cramming the consciousness of most today tend to be pre-set, borrowed images used in non-imaginative, literal ways to name and interpret life."<sup>1</sup> As I talk with congregations about youth ministry, I find that many people appear to have trouble imaging a youth ministry that they haven't participated in. While we live in a culture full of images, sometimes we have trouble creating them ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Here I will offer several images that I hope will be helpful as we examine youth ministry. The images are not full-blown models. Hopefully, however, the images will begin to paint a picture that you will complete; perhaps suggesting a reality different from the one you understand or have participated in. The images that I am about to sketch are just that—sketches. They may ring true with your understanding of ministry to, with, and by adolescents, or they may ring hollow. One of the images might be the lens through which you see youth ministry, or it might be a lens you reject for theological or theoretical reasons. Please understand that I am not suggesting one unique image, but several—seven to be exact—because I believe that there is no single image for youth ministry, just as I believe that there is not a single model for effective, faithful youth ministry. I invite you to think of an image or two of your own that might help your congregation envision new ways of doing youth ministry.

### The "Bill Cosby" Image

I call this the "Bill Cosby" image because Cosby had one of the top-rated television shows and because he is very good at what he does: entertain people. Using humor and real life, he often makes a valuable point. But if he doesn't, it really doesn't matter because we have been entertained. Students of mine have referred to this concept as babysitting image. It is not very popular with them, because these students believe that in it they are expected to merely babysit the youth, or entertain the kiddies. They think of a person, usually male, who has an ability to entertain with a guitar (some have called this "have guitar will travel"<sup>3</sup>) or with jokes or with words or with videos or with anything that holds the attention of the youth. One goal of this kind of ministry is to keep youth from being *bored*—that horrible possibility when one deals with adolescents. Of course, if the youth are not bored, they will continue to come to church, or at least to youth group. If one is a good enough entertainer, the youth ministry flourishes. And if one is a tremendous Christian entertainer, then Christian values, lifestyle, witness, and so on get infused within the entertainer's message.

The growing passivity of our culture is related to television, and perhaps an image from television can work for our youth ministry. However, those who believe that discipleship is an activity we engage in and not one in which we passively sit back to be entertained will find this image unhelpful and not what we believe youth ministry is about. But a church may try to be a Bill Cosby, hire a Bill Cosby stand-in, or want the youth leader to be Bill Cosby.

### **The "Merlin the Magician" Image**

This is one of my favorite images, in part because Merlin the Magician was always my fairy-tale hero. The man would appear almost magically and mysteriously to solve the problems facing King Arthur and his kingdom. Then Merlin disappeared, only to be summoned again or to appear in another time of crisis. Some churches appear to expect Merlin to mysteriously arrive and solve or deal with their youth ministry problem. This image, too, gets a lot of negative publicity unless you are Merlin or your congregation has summoned Merlin. Part of this negative reaction is that when Merlin leaves, no one else in the congregation understands anything more about ministry or youth ministry than they did before. Enabling laity to do youth ministry or enabling youth to minister is not what this image is about. Typically the Merlin person has a tremendous charismatic gift of helping groups, such as youth groups, come alive and become excited about ministry and life.

I have some sympathy for this image because in reflecting on my own ministry, I see that I have been like Merlin. Arriving at a congregation at the wave of a denominational leader's wand or simply because I live near a particular church while I teach at a seminary, I begin a ministry with adolescents. A few years or even months later, I am whisked away, leaving a flourishing youth ministry that may not survive without me.<sup>4</sup> That church may not be ready to assume the youth ministry that was being done in "their" name.

Some of you may see these two images, the "Bill Cosby" entertainer and the Merlin the Magician, as closely related. You are right; they are. Yet, there are some differences. Entertainers do what they do best—entertain. Magicians do what they do best—"magically" solve an immediate problem. I believe these two images are what many churches are looking for in youth ministry. Unfortunately, this understanding of ministry is extremely limited.

### **The "Anne Sullivan\*\* Image**

As you may know, as a child Helen Keller was struck by a disease that left her blind, deaf, and unable to speak. In the spring of 1887, Anne Mansfield Sullivan was employed by Helen's family to try to teach her. For several months Anne worked with Helen, trying to enable her to spell rudimentary words by making finger signs on Helen's palm. Then a breakthrough came in the life of Helen Keller, the "aha!" experience, the "teachable moment," or if your theology prefers, the movement of the Holy Spirit. Helen Keller described the experience years later in her autobiography:

We—Helen and Anne—walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honey suckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly and then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed

upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. . . . It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time I longed for a new day to come.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to see the extent to which Anne Sullivan's presence made possible Helen Keller's discovery. Anne Sullivan did not cause the learning to occur, but her presence with Helen throughout all the tedious weeks of dealing with simple signs established a possibility that otherwise would have been missing. She was with Helen as an image of what could be hoped for. She had no presumptions about her ability to teach Helen Keller, but she knew what conditions might be created in which this learning might take place. She maintained the continuity of Helen's instruction, and she was ready to interact with her when the teachable moment occurred. Furthermore, she understood that this particular breakthrough was only a starting point. But she realized clearly that it was from this point that Helen Keller's education could truly begin.<sup>6</sup>

Is this a helpful image for youth ministry? We, in the church, are establishing a possibility with our youth, building a relationship with them, so that when the Holy Spirit moves within them or when the "aha!" experience happens, we are present and ready to seize the opportunity, realizing that this is just the start of the faith pilgrimage. Can we be to youth what Anne Sullivan was to Helen Keller, an image of what can be hoped for?

For many years these three images alone were my idea of youth ministry, with the latter being the one I held the most hope for in terms of youth ministry. Recently, however, I have begun to find four other images useful.

## **The Storm Home Image**

"Minnesota blizzards, Garrison Keillor recalls from his youth, often attacked without notice, stranding farm kids in town where they attended high school. Knowing this danger, school officials would assign each pupil a 'storm home.' "<sup>7</sup> A kind, caring, and loving family would volunteer to take in students until the roads were cleared enough for them to go home.

Can this be a useful image for youth ministry in a local congregational setting? Is the church a place where a safe haven, a storm home if you will, ought to be provided for teens, a refuge from the "storms" of their adolescent years?

The church's youth ministry may need to provide a home for youth safe from the ravages of a drug culture or gang wars that may be occurring in the neighborhoods in which they live. Or the church may need to be a place for youth caught between two cultures, the world of their immigrant parents and their new home of America. The church may need to be a place where second-generation Americans can come and relax, being themselves without fear of rejection or tension with either of the two cultures they live in daily. Additionally, the church's youth ministry may be helpful to those adolescents who find their family home a place of abuse. The church's ministry with youth may need to be

composed of warm, kind, caring, and loving adults who incarnate God's love in a family or community atmosphere.

Recently I ran into a former student of mine on the streets of Chicago. She is serving a church in inner-city Detroit. Her question to me was why hadn't the seminary prepared her to deal with how to keep guns and drugs out of church, how to deal with the gang whose "turf" was across the street from her church, or her fifth grader who is a local drug supplier. Would a "storm home" youth ministry be an appropriate image for her church's youth ministry?

### **"Julie, the White-Water Rafting Guide" Image**

Julie is a white-water rafting guide whom we got to know over the past several summers as we rafted with her down rivers in North Carolina. Her task was to gently guide us down a stretch of river that she had navigated before. Each day the river was different, and each group that went with her had its own personality and problems. No two trips were ever the same for her. She thought of herself as feeling her way down the river with the other people in her raft. She envisioned herself as an enabler and empowerer of the people in the raft—so that before the trip was over, the people in the raft were in control of the trip. Although at times she would strongly suggest to us a particular way of navigating, she never demanded that we had to do things her way. Rather, her attitude was "Here is the river of life; let us journey down the river together, as partners, each of whom brings special and unique gifts to the journey and to our raft."

Is this a helpful image of youth ministry leaders, as guides, rafting down the river of life with all its rapids and calm eddies with youth? If this image is our guide, we do not tell youth where to go; rather, we go with them, making mistakes with them and showing them parts of the river they may never see for themselves. We try to keep the journey relatively safe, but we know that being on the river means that some safety is sacrificed. We know that letting youth make decisions means some safety is sacrificed, but we also know that is the way youth can learn and be empowered for life.

### **The Worship Image**

Don Webb is the retired President of Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana. He was my pastor during part of my adolescent years and was one of the people who opened up for me the whole world of worship. He helped to make worship come alive, to have meaning, to become a central part of my life. Worship as an image for youth ministry is a brief sketch I would like us to entertain.

In some churches, one of which William Myers identifies in his recent book, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry*,<sup>8</sup> worship is the central part of their experience together. From worship flows the entire life of the congregation. In this church, the entire youth ministry, as well as all other ministries, flows from the liturgical experience of Sunday morning.

Worship is alive, a pulsating experience that youth not only participate in but also help to lead with regularity. The reason I sketch this image in the terms of an example is that we have yet to see it work for any length of time in white, middle-class, mainline churches. Worship for youth in many churches is a deadening and life-sapping experience that holds no meaning or relevance for youth and the world in which they live. However, William Myers has proved to me the possibilities of this image, and so I lift it

up with some hope that perhaps you can use it in your congregation's youth ministry.<sup>9</sup> Don Webb succeeded in making worship the central part of my life as an adolescent.

## **The Artist Image**

Michael Warren describes the artist image this way:

The question I love to ask teachers is: Tell me about the special talents of the young people you meet. One can answer that question only by pointing to particular persons. One has to name individuals and then explain how one has been paying attention to their strengths rather than to their weaknesses. This amounts to a connoisseurship of the human, an aesthetic sensitivity to human beauty and possibility. For any of us to do this, we must have the eye of an artist, which is the eye of a lover. . . . Sometimes I think that every young person is a virtuoso-in-secret and that my role is to discover the virtuosity.<sup>10</sup>

Can we as a church, as adults in the church, be artists, seeing in each youth the special gifts and talents and graces that they have been blessed with by God?<sup>11</sup> This image empowers youth for ministry. It is able to bring careful consideration of the gifts that God has given to people for youth ministry. This image may call us to take vocation seriously once again in youth ministry, helping youth to discover and build a vocation around their gifts and talents and not around wealth, prestige, power, or some other cultural understanding of success.

I have offered seven images for youth ministry, two of which may tell us what things are like (Bill Cosby and Merlin the Magician), and five that may call us to what youth ministry could be like (Anne Sullivan, Julie the white-water guide, the artist, worship, and the storm home images). I know that I have not exhausted the images. For example, Jeff Johnson has sketched an image of youth ministry as evangelization, "of inviting persons into deeper relationships with us, with themselves, with their God,"<sup>12</sup> and, I might add with God's creation. Perhaps you have other images that are helpful for you in your unique situation. I have sketched these images, not to fully explain them or for you to understand them as models of youth ministry. Rather, I want to lift up some images of what might be possible for your congregation in its ministry with, to, and by adolescents.

For Jennifer, Betsy, and Dave, whom we met in chapter 1, these images were helpful as they began to think about youth ministry at Sunnydale Church. Jennifer commented that she often thought of herself as the ringmaster of a seven-ring circus. Betsy agreed that the hectic pace of congregational life often made her feel that way, too. They also thought that some of the people who helped to govern the church didn't have any vision of what youth ministry could be at Sunnydale. They began to think about what image or combination of images fit best with what they wanted to happen at Sunnydale in youth ministry. What images resonated with you? Why? Does one of the images describe things at your church better than the other images? Are there other images that you want to use to describe or suggest youth ministry in your church? What is the most helpful image for you as you think about youth ministry?