Faith Beyond Youth Group: A Framework for Character-Forming Discipleship in Youth Ministry

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**Abstract**

Young people’s ability to thrive is made difficult by widespread challenges. Thankfully many core habits of the Christian faith serve as tools that equip young people to navigate their world, pursue peace and justice, and flourish. This presentation describes a research-based framework for character-forming discipleship that focuses on cultivating trust, modeling growth, teaching for transformation, practicing together, and making meaning. This framework also presents an opportunity for collaborative discipleship within and across church communities.

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**Introduction**

Young people today face a constellation of challenges,[[1]](#endnote-1) and their understandable reactions have led some scholars to describe this generation as one of the most anxious.[[2]](#endnote-2) In the midst of these challenges, today’s teenagers are also remarkably adaptiveasthey meet obstacles with creativity and agility.[[3]](#endnote-3) Youth ministry leaders are uniquely positioned to equip teenagers with the tools they need to adaptively navigate their world, further enabling them to overcome changing circumstances and new difficulties.

One set of tools available to teenagers is offered by the Christian faith. Research continues to reveal the benefits of religious affiliation and practice,[[4]](#endnote-4) often connected to teachings and habits that develop character and virtue. These character-forming practices serve young people well by developing healthy patterns of thought and behavior that extend beyond youth group.

Unfortunately, youth ministry leaders and contemporary character and virtue development (CVD) science are often disconnected. Thankfully, this disconnect can be addressed with appropriate translation and contextualization enabled by collaborations between practitioners and scholars. With such contextualization in mind, the Fuller Youth Institute initiated the Character and Virtue Development in Youth Ministry (CVDYM) project[[5]](#endnote-5) that aims to “equip congregations with resources to better cultivate in adolescents key virtues and components of character.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

To date, the project has reviewed available scholarship in the areas of CVD science, character education, Christian ethics, and discipleship studies;[[7]](#endnote-7) surveyed the goals and needs of youth ministry leaders;[[8]](#endnote-8) gathered and sought feedback from diverse practitioners and scholars; and interviewed youth ministry leaders from across the country to investigate their character-forming discipleship practices.[[9]](#endnote-9) The next stage of the CVDYM project now centers on the generation of resources.

An integral piece of our resource generation is a unifying framework that specifies the steps youth ministry leaders need to reliably and holistically form character through discipleship-focused ministries while also avoiding toxic practices that foster behaviorism. Accordingly, this presentation will describe a research-based framework for character-forming discipleship that focuses on (1) cultivating trust, (2) modeling growth, (3) teaching for transformation, (4) practicing together, and (5) making meaning. Each element of the framework will be illustrated by stories from youth ministries across the country. We believe that with widespread adoption, this framework also presents an opportunity for collaborative discipleship within and across church communities.

**Method**

Our framework is based primarily on a thorough literature review of scholarly work in the fields of Christian ethics, character education, and discipleship studies. Illustrative case studies also provide examples of contemporary ministry practice. The following sections will describe the methodology of both approaches.

**Literature Review**

A systematic literature review of Christian ethics, character education, and discipleship studies provides the foundation for our character-forming discipleship framework. Yenney, Greenway, and Nopachai argue that in order to achieve the goal of “equip[ing] congregations with resources to cultivate in adolescents key virtues and components of character,” youth ministry leaders:

… require three different types of knowledge as conceived by Aristotle. The first type of knowledge is *theoria.* This knowledge is abstract or theoretical—like the physics of objects in flight or mathematical probability. Then there is *techne.* This is knowledge about universal or generalized skills, like how to hit, field, and throw a baseball properly. Then there is *phronesis.* Often translated as “practical wisdom,” *phronesis* constitutes the sort of knowledge that tells us what skill to apply, at what time, in what amount and for what reasons. … Contemporary youth ministries also need three types of knowledge for faith development of character in young people: the *theoria* of Christian ethics, the *techne* of character education, and the *phronesis* of discipleship.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Accordingly, their literature review gathered insights from each of these disciplines. Together with learning from previous stages of the project, findings were synthesized to identify the five foci presented as a character-forming discipleship framework. These foci are both research-based (e.g., CVD science points to their necessity for CVD) and implementable by youth ministry leaders (i.e., they can be readily applied in youth ministry settings).

**Illustrative Case Studies**

In order to illustrate everyday examples of this framework, seven illustrative case studies were conducted across the United States. For each site, we conducted document review (e.g., examining bulletins, websites, social media), direct observation (e.g., attending worship services and other events), interviews, and focus groups. Interview and focus group participants included senior leaders, youth ministry leaders, high school students, post-high school aged young people, youth ministry volunteers, parents of high school students, and any other individuals or groups considered core to the ministry.

Interview and focus group protocols were semi-structured and questions focused on the five foci of the framework, the mission and goals of the ministry, the qualities fostered among young people by the ministry, various relationships within the ministry, the context of the ministry, and additional questions specific to the unique practices of the ministry. We recorded all interviews and focus groups and each site visit team generated a report following the completion of the site visit. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we conducted some interviews and focus groups online via video conferencing software and others in person.

Participating ministries were selected from a sample of youth ministry leaders who participated in an interview during a previous phase of research.[[11]](#endnote-11) As with the interviews conducted during that phase, we prioritized the inclusion of various (1) denominational or theological backgrounds, (2) ethnocultural backgrounds, and (3) sized congregations, while remaining sensitive to other realities including socioeconomic status, geographic location, and gender of youth ministry leader.

**Results**

Our character-forming discipleship framework includes five foci: (1) cultivating trust, (2) modeling growth, (3) teaching for transformation, (4) practicing together, and (5) making meaning. Each element of this framework both supports the formation of character and may be readily integrated into discipleship ministries. The following section connects each focus to questions teenagers ask, the life of Jesus, actions youth ministry leaders can take, and examples from contemporary ministry.

**Cultivate Trust**

Trust provides a foundation upon which character formation and spiritual growth may occur. As teenagers begin new relationships with youth leaders, small group leaders, or a church community, they often wonder:

* Can I trust you?
* Can I trust this group?
* Can I trust the church?

These questions are common to any new relationships but are also magnified by stories of leaders betraying the trust of their congregation and churches adopting positions that don’t seem to align with the teachings of Jesus.

We connect the questions of teenagers today to questions Jesus’ friends and closest followers may have shared: *Can I trust Jesus? Can I trust this group? Can I trust this community we’re trying to form?* Jesus and his apostles formed trust with one another by “doing life” together. They lived and worked in continuous, reciprocal relationships.

To counter teenagers’ suspicion of institutions such as the church, leaders today can cultivate trust by following Jesus’ example and using these navigational tools: Providing consistent care through empathetic listening and authenticity in the context of safe space in community.

Students and leaders often described the importance of trust during our illustrative case studies. One student shared:

[My small group leader is] someone I trust with the deepest parts of my life. Things I’ve told no one else, I’ve told [my small group leader] because of the trust that she gives me and the other people in our small group…to have me know that I can go to her for everything…she tells me the things I don’t want to hear but I need.

Leaders also described how they build trust in their ministries. One leader said:

It just takes that time…chipping a little bit week after week after week…It’s just that consistent investment in them I think is key. You may not ever see it after 4 years or however long you are with them. Just making that investment in the students is key whether you reap the rewards or not, you know, and see the changes.

Another leader similarly described the commitment required to cultivate trust. While discussing communication with young people and the unconditional love they need, he said, “Sometimes you get ghosted by the kids. But you can never ghost them.” Later in the interview he shared:

Kids have all the same issues adults do, or adults have all the same issues kids do, but you work with them all and befriend them all – maybe especially the ones that ghost you more so than the ones that don’t, because there is a reason behind it usually.

A young adult described the effects of such care and the need for teenagers to be known on a personal level:

If a kid shares an important story, ask them follow up questions about that. If they’re really looking forward to a trip they’re going on, when they get back, ask them about it. Show them you remember, that you care, that you are interested in what they have to say, and build that relationship with them more than just that hour and a half at youth group.

**Model Growth**

Modeling – providing an everyday example of character and faith from whom young people can learn – builds upon and reinforces trust. As teenagers learn and look for examples, they gravitate toward consistent models but may be suspicious of those who fail to “practice what they preach.” We also highlight the importance of modeling because character tends to be “caught” before it is “taught.” As teenagers engage with leaders in their church, they may often wonder:

* Are you for real?
* Are you the same outside church as you are inside?
* Can I bring my outside self into the church too?
* Is my full self welcome here, including all of my doubts and questions?

Again we connect these questions from teenagers to questions Jesus’ disciples may have asked. After seeing Jesus do yet another stunning miracle, his disciples must also have wondered, “Is this guy for real?” They must have questioned if Jesus’ standard was perfection, or at least awesomeness. They certainly assumed he would take religious and political power, and some even believed military might, over the rulers of the day. Imagine their surprise when Jesus flipped all of those scripts.

Leaders today can model consistency and integrity as they live everyday faith imperfectly, both within and beyond church gatherings. In this way, our ministries become communities of practice and growth. Navigational tools for modeling growth include sharing adequate proximity and time with students, self-assessing our own modeling, being appropriately vulnerable, and helping students reflect on their models and exchange negative ones for Christ-centered ones.

One leader from our illustrative case studies shared that she didn’t always have the answers to kids' questions, but committed to exploring things together. She said it’s important that students know she is not perfect and that they are not alone, explaining that:

It comes from being able to be honest and vulnerable with the kids themselves. I’m not ever in a place where I’m going to sit and preach at or teach at these kids. I think I need to be a role model and an example with how I live now, how I treat other people, but also being able to be honest about, ‘You know what? When I was sixteen, I screwed up, too, or I also struggled with this, or I went through this rough time and it was horrible but I got help, or I worked through it, and you can too and it will be okay.’ And I’m right here and I can help you with it.

One student described the effects of this kind of modeling: “We’ve grown up with these people. They’ve seen us since we were seven or eight years old. So they’ve been able to see us grow up and we’ve been able to see them grow up even more.”

Another leader shared the importance of modeling not only from youth ministry leaders and volunteers, but also from parents. She noted several parents who were heavily invested in serving and actively involved their kids in their ministry. She added:

I see parents trying to lead their kids into that same mold of serving, and I don’t see anything so far but fruit from it…The [parents] closest to our kids are the ones forming their character by the way they talk to each other, talk to their wife or children, how they treat people…

Another pastor also highlighted the importance of parental modeling by sharing a story from one of her students. The girl shared that every day she sees her mom and dad sit at the kitchen table, do devotions, read the Bible, and pray together. She said, “That’s what I want in my life.” The student explained how her parents have such an impact because when kids see Christ-centered character at home, it can have a deeper impact than what leaders might say or do at youth group.

**Teach for Transformation**

Young people today receive information and advice from countless sources ranging from church to school to social media to streaming services. This flood of communication requires them to pick and choose reliable sources of knowledge and guidance. Thankfully, as trust develops and authentic character is modeled, opportunities for teaching and instruction follow. Importantly, teaching built on trust and delivered by role models is received more readily by young people than teaching from a stranger or a source of mistrust. This foundation of trust helps respond to some of the questions teenagers today may wonder:

* Why should I pay attention to what you’re teaching?
* How does this matter in my life?
* And for some young people, *I’ve heard all this before. Why should I care now?*

Again, Jesus knew we’d face similar questions. Maybe that’s why he taught with authority and by engaging his followers in embodied learning. He taught as they traveled and interacted with people, telling stories and responding to people's questions with additional questions designed to spur their own growth.

Similarly, leaders today need to do more than just teach with authority. They need to shift teaching from a one-way event to an embodied process through which everyone engages and changes through thoughtful storytelling, asking good questions, and actively involving students in teaching and learning. Rather than offer young people a checklist of “life application” steps, leaders teach in a way that develops character for day-to-day decisions.

Leaders and students shared examples of such teaching. One student said their teachers often shared stories from their personal lives to teach them about faith:

For me, it’s cool to see how Christianity leads people in their different lives. They always share stories from their personal lives, and it shows me that, through their models, no matter how much adversity you face, you can always improve. God isn’t going to leave you. He’s always going to be there.

Two students from the same church described how teaching changes or shapes their life outside of youth group. One student said:

[When my youth pastor] is talking about a topic, or if we are all talking about a topic, we see what Jesus is doing, we take that with us, and we use it wherever we are around us, so whether that is being kind, being generous, giving help, we use that everywhere, or at least we try our best to.

The second student elaborated:

So say a topic one day would be bullying. We’ll talk about bullying. We’ll read a chapter that has to do with bullying. We’ll talk about what bullying has to do with our lives – what we have seen happen to us about bullying. And that’s where we get that deeper connection because … people have gone through it before so it has become personal, you know? So we are understanding and so at the end of the day, she gives us a piece of paper about a verse. We take that verse with us, and she gives us something to do every week. So she’ll be like, try to do this this week. Something like, if you see an act of bullying or you see someone that’s down, try to make them happy. Try to do that multiple times this week. And then the next time you go to youth group you’ll be so excited because you’ll be like, ‘Hey, [youth pastor], I did this this week. I did so many of those.’

Another leader acknowledged the limitations and strengths of teaching, particularly how teaching connects to and reinforces relationships. He said:

95% of the sermons that I prepare, my students will not remember. They’ll remember the stories I used to illustrate points but not the points...if the feeling that they get is, ‘I don’t know if we learned about this, but I do know I have this relationship with my pastor and I can go talk to him about these things,’ I’m okay with that…The teaching then becomes really focused on, ‘What does this young person want to learn and then how can I guide them through that?’

That same leader later also expanded on their point, saying:

I agree that it’s important to ‘know,’ but I also think that at this age the relationships are going to make a longer lasting impact in their faith in the long run. I think the education will always be there, especially in the ability for us to have information. I think really that’s what I’ve been struggling with for the past few years. How much time do I spend teaching these almost seminary-level topics with 12-18-year-olds versus just talking about investing in their lives, discipleship? I think these all blend together; I don’t think they have to be separate.

**Practice Together**

Modeling lives of character and reinforcing these principles with teaching prepares young people well for putting lessons into practice. As young people consider how they can take next steps, they may often wonder:

* How do I do this?
* Can I try it even if I fail?
* How do I do this around my friends who don’t share my faith?
* How do I do this in a way that matters to my community and world?

When faced with similar questions from his youth group (i.e., his disciples), Jesus invited them to join in his ministry. He sent them out. He gave them opportunities to fail (and they did). He offered them grace on the other side of failure and then commissioned them, even sharing his authority with them.

In the same way, leaders invite students to learn through practicing how they live out their faith in youth ministry and in real life at home, school, and everyday situations. Character takes time, practice, and cultivating a lifestyle—a journey. One of the tools that we have to cultivate is failure: giving young people the space and opportunity to practice their faith and character, fail, receive grace, and try again.

One leader described how they approach and orient students to their service. They said:

We never ask people, ‘What did you like about that activity?’ We’ll never ask that. What we ask is ‘What did you experience? When did you see something beautiful happen? When did you struggle? What was difficult?’ Because we never want to create an environment where service becomes a preference. Like, ‘I would rather pass out food than take out trash.’ What we want to create is never placing judgment on what the need is. If the need is there, then I am here. I am here for it.

Another church includes high school students as student leaders for the middle school fellowship. The youth director mentioned that they have so many young people volunteer to be student leaders that they have to be careful to not have more leaders than students at middle school fellowship. Leaders spoke highly of their servant team and described how it shapes young people. They help in planning the middle school fellowship and leading their small groups. One leader said:

[This] is a great opportunity for them to step into the shoes of leadership and realize that this is actually not easy. It is pretty thankless and you have to have a servant heart to do this and survive it.

Another pastor described teaching her youth to engage with the church’s prayer labyrinth:

Spending time with Jesus in order to become more like Jesus, which is what the disciples did. What does that mean in real life? I think things like gathering together, practicing your faith in multiple ways like through spiritual practices, like that’s one of the reasons we go to the prayer labyrinth because we’re going to force a little contemplation out of you.

Another leader described how they encourage students to take action in response to contemporary problems. The leader noted:

I consider…pursuit of social justice as a vital part of how Jesus lived out his ministry, so that means that should be a vital part of how I imitate Christ in the world. I don’t know if the kids could articulate that, but that’s what I try to [do]...In the past we’ve done some more practical things like we’ve written letters to government officials. During the pandemic, actually, I went with one of my teens to a Black Lives Matter protest after George Floyd was killed. I think we could probably do better kind of putting feet to faith, especially in terms of the youth ministry. Finding more opportunities to do that. I try to set an example in a number of ways. Being open about whatever my activism is but then also things like we use reusable dishes at youth group, and so I try to teach kids that that’s because the earth is important.

**Make Meaning**

Following this practical action and engagement with their community and world, leaders and students have an opportunity for reflection. Reflecting on their actions and the world around them enables teenagers to integrate their identity into a larger narrative and make meaning. Whether teenagers are reacting to tragic events or thrilling experiences, they wonder:

* What happened?
* What does it mean?
* Where is God?
* What now?

Similarly, following Jesus’ traumatic death, his friends grappled with some of the same questions as they walked to Emmaus. In the midst of their confusion, Jesus showed up and helped them process it and make meaning from it.

In the same way, leaders can employ navigational tools to guide students through cycles of action and reflection, tapping into the power of naming experiences, evaluating actions before going out and trying again, and integrating what we’ve learned into our worldview. Experience is powerful, but processed experience is transformative. Leaders can ask: How did it go? What does it mean? What is God inviting you into? Who are you becoming?

Opportunities to reflect and make meaning vary across different churches. One student shared that mission trips through the church have shaped her thoughts about what she wants to do with her life. She said:

In our mission trips and in our mission work I feel like it’s really opened my eyes to what other people are going through and how I can be a resource to help them, and I feel like that’s really shaped who I am and opened my eyes to what I might want to do with more of my life.

Another ministry described the importance of debriefing after service work. They believe that the debrief is important for helping students bring what they experienced back into their day-to-day lives. One ministry leader said that a part of debrief was asking the participants, “When is the next [ministry] trip?” Participants would answer when trips were scheduled and their locations and the leader would correct them by saying, “The next [ministry] trip is Monday morning when you’re at school or when you’re at home on Sunday.” The leader continued, encouraging students to reflect, saying:

You don’t have to be with a group or in an organized setting to serve. Service can be doing the dishes when your mom doesn’t ask you to. Service can be sitting with the kid who doesn’t get sat next to at lunch. Or, helping someone pick up their stuff when it’s falling. We have kids brainstorm how they can take [ministry] into their daily life and also how they can push themselves out of their comfort zone.

Leaders from that same ministry are former participants in the program and also now professionals in various vocations. The individuals we interviewed were involved in helping professions like teaching. They said their decision to pursue those careers was influenced by their involvement in that ministry. One leader noted:

There is a thing about [ministry]. It really becomes a part of your identity, and so it inspires. I am a [ministry] leader, therefore, in whatever profession I eventually choose or end up in it is going to be something where I am serving others.

Another leader, who is in management consulting, said her involvement in the ministry didn’t necessarily impact her career choice, but rather what kind of a workplace environment she wanted:

The reason that I chose this job was, along with for-profit consulting, they have…pro-bono consulting for non-profit organizations. One of the reasons I really wanted to join this firm was to continue working with non-profits and serving in that way, even if it was at my job.

Another leader described their approach to service and the opportunities it provides to think about the emotions they experienced. They said:

Most of what we do is with people, because what we want to create is an opportunity for understanding and experiencing what it is to serve. Understanding everything that Christ experienced when he engaged and served others. Not everything is a feel-good experience, or will be about getting thanks. Part of the way we design the experience is going face-to-face with the way you make stereotypes and working through rejection. Some of the things we do is set people up to fail on purpose.

**Discussion**

Our character-forming discipleship framework is designed to help youth ministry leaders reliably and holistically instill character traits in their young people by focusing on five navigational elements: (1) cultivating trust, (2) modeling growth, (3) teaching for transformation, (4) practicing together, and (5) making meaning. Character formation research reinforces the efficacy of these practices, and we believe this framework can also be contextualized in various youth ministry settings, in turn creating an opportunity for collaborative discipleship within and across church communities. The following section will discuss several implications for youth ministries.

**This Framework Builds on a Strength of Youth Ministry: Relationships**

The task of faith and character formation may seem daunting. Youth ministry leaders often have one hour each week – sometimes less – to minister with young people. Attendance at youth ministry events can be sporadic, requiring youth ministry leaders to ensure lessons engage both those who attended the previous week and those who didn’t. However, one strength youth ministries possess is their ability to form relationships among students and between students and adults. Accordingly, this framework begins with an important piece of character formation – cultivating trust – that builds on a strength of youth ministry. This strength establishes a foundation upon which the other elements of the framework can build.

**This Framework Recognizes the Need for Leaders to “Practice What They Preach” and the Harm Models Can Cause When They Fail to Live Lives of Character**

Another important element of this framework is the need for leaders who exemplify character and faith. Many young people may be discouraged by Christian leaders across the country or within their own church who fail to live virtuous lives. This framework highlights the importance of acting in such a way that young people witness lived values and recognizes the harm that hypocrisy can cause. Leaders need not be perfect, but should recognize that if their teachings don’t match their practice, their words may be ignored. Leaders who “practice what they preach” often strengthen trust in their relationships with young people and tend to be more readily followed as models.

**This Framework Situates Teaching Within the Context of Relationships and Modeling**

Teaching or preaching remain one of the most central element of many ministries, including youth ministries. This framework recognizes the importance of teaching and the efficacy of teaching grounded within relationships and appropriately modeled lives. Such relationships amplify the impact of teaching. Young people who trust and look up to a leader will more readily seek and attend to knowledge and wisdom passed down to them. Teaching situated in this way is less about a “sage from the stage” and more about a “guide from the side.”

**This Framework Requires More than Just “Head Knowledge”; Young People Need Opportunities to Act**

In addition to the education that takes place by watching and learning from models, this framework requires opportunities to put learning into action. Similar to developing any other skill, young people need opportunities to practice what they’ve learned. Lessons about character and faith cannot only be theoretical; they must include opportunity for action, and often with that action, the opportunity to fail and try again. These opportunities may take place during service or mission trips or in young peoples’ everyday lives. Opportunities to lead and make key decisions may also be usefully integrated into such practice.

**This Framework Ensures Young People Have Space to Reflect After Acting**

Finally, after young people have had opportunity to practice what they’ve learned, youth ministries have the opportunity to help young people make meaning and incorporate these lessons into their identity. Reflection maximizes the learning that takes place by connecting successes, failures, emotions, and identity. To facilitate this meaning making, youth ministries may include guided reflections that helps young people unpack their experiences and continue forward in lives of character and faith. Group debriefing times may help young people learn from one another and foster a strong sense of belonging as well.

**Conclusion**

Though young people face many changes and challenges in their lives and world, we believe this generation is adaptive and may be further equipped with tools that help them navigate their world, pursue peace and justice, and flourish. Our research-based framework for character-forming discipleship focuses on cultivating trust, modeling growth, teaching for transformation, practicing together, and making meaning. The actions described within this framework encourage youth leaders to form within their young people the character strengths they need today. We also believe this framework represents an opportunity for collaborative discipleship within and across church communities, as leaders from various Christian traditions may implement and contextualize this framework in their ministries.

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