

Youth Ministry in Thirds: To Accelerate the Development of Lifetime Faith

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Abstract:

Approximately half of those active in youth groups leave the church. To see many more teenagers follow Jesus for a lifetime, movement toward a new youth ministry paradigm seems essential.

Scripture and research appear to converge on three elements most related to lifetime faith:

1. Youth ministry that contributes to the spiritual life in teenagers' homes
2. Youth ministry that multiplies warm relationships and shared ministry between teenagers and the congregation
3. Youth ministry targeted specifically to the youth group

This paper proposes that leaders should view their youth ministry in thirds, reflecting those three elements. Degree programs need revision in order to train leaders in new competencies.

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Youth Ministry in Thirds: To Accelerate the Development of Lifetime Faith

Those who focus on a young generation tend to ask, “How effective is the church’s youth ministry today?” The more important question might be, How effective is the church’s youth ministry in reaching and transforming teenagers who will adore Christ for a *lifetime*, completing their unique missions on the earth for the glory of God? Or asked another way, To what degree will the church’s teenagers spend the rest of their lives loving God, loving people, and making disciples of all peoples for the glory of God?

The Status Quo and a Proposed Model of Ministry

About half of those in youth groups will leave the church after high school, and most never will return. Reporting on results from the Sticky Faith study, Kara Powell notes: “Across cultures, a major turning point for young people’s faith seems to be high school graduation. Multiple studies highlight that 40 to 50 percent of youth group seniors—like the young people in your church—drift from God and the faith community after they graduate from high school.”¹

Researchers and church leaders have given careful thought and study to the teenagers who walk away from the church. Perhaps less attention has been given to those who stay and who move into young adulthood as followers of Jesus. This paper gives attention to both groups.

Thesis Statement: Careful study of Scripture and careful observation of church youth group members who walk in faith a lifetime call for a youth ministry design that commits a third of time and resources to each of these elements:

1. Youth ministry that contributes to the spiritual life in teenagers’ homes
2. Youth ministry that multiplies warm relationships and shared ministry between teenagers and the congregation
3. Youth ministry targeted specifically to the youth group

The church does introduce some teenagers to Jesus and then disciples some of those into believers who will, for a lifetime, love God, love people, and make disciples for the glory of God. But at present, that description only fits a small percent of church teenagers.² Observation reveals those lifetime disciples tended to share three experiences as teenagers:

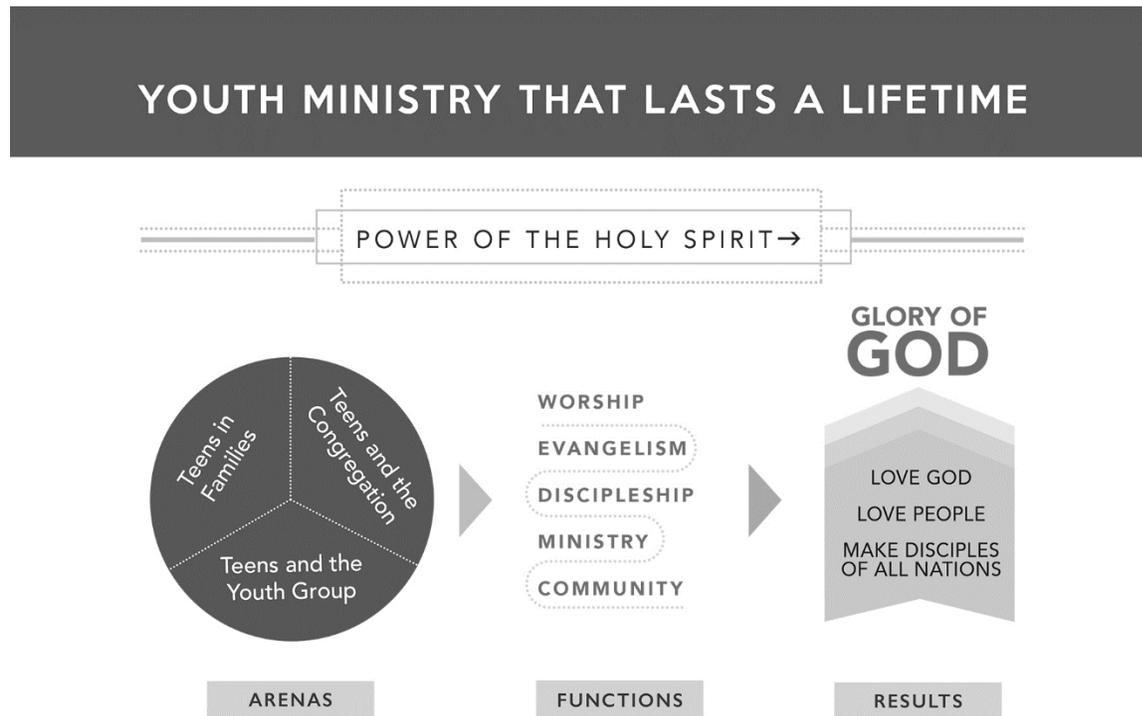
1. They were reared by parents who adored Jesus, loved the church, and were on mission to see Christ’s kingdom come on earth.
2. They grew up with a rich web of relationships with the full congregation and were on mission with church members of all ages.
3. They were in a Bible-drenched youth group led by leaders who carried the aroma of Jesus.

This paper proposes a new model of youth ministry that intentionally captures those same three dynamics of life and ministry. Specifically, the paper proposes youth ministry that gives:

1. A third of time and resources to accelerating the spiritual impact in teenagers' homes
2. A third immersing every teenager in the full life and ministry of the congregation
3. A third leading what churches traditionally have considered youth ministry, targeted to the youth group

Balancing these three elements may well lead to much higher percentages of teenagers loving God, loving people, and making disciples for a lifetime.

Of course, no youth leader ever has a week that could be so neatly divided into thirds. And even the concept of thirds must be modified somewhat given the context in which youth leaders serve. But the motif of thirds is a reproducible concept. The idea is easy to communicate and easy to remember. Leaders who grasp the value of three arenas for youth ministry will find their own ways to apply that understanding to their unique ministry situations.



Youth Ministry That Impacts the Families of Teenagers

Early voices called for youth leaders to give intentional focus to the parents and families of teenagers. (Richard Ross, *Ministry with Youth and Their Parents*, 1986; Merton Strommen, *Five Cries of Youth*, 1988; Walt Mueller, *Ministry to Families with Teenagers*, 1988; and others). But only in this century has careful research and proliferation of writing led to broad conversation on

the issue among youth leaders. The following two statements by Christian Smith capture the heart of that conversation:

[T]he majority of U.S. teenagers seem basically content to follow the faith of their families with little questioning. When it comes to religion, they are quite happy to go along and get along. The popular images of “storm and stress,” “Generation Gap,” and “teen rebellion” may describe the religious orientations and experiences of most teenagers of prior generations. But they do not accurately portray the religious realities of most teenagers in the U.S. today.³

The evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well. But normally parents are most important in forming their children’s religious and spiritual lives.⁴

Even before the seminal National Study of Youth and Religion, Merton Strommen and Richard Hardel were crunching numbers leading to important conclusions: “Though a child may be strongly influenced by his or her friends, the power of this peer group emerges as dominant only when the relationship of love with parents is vastly diminished. Caring parents are the primary influence in shaping the moral values of their children.”⁵

The Current Situation

Most youth leaders now acknowledge that God’s primary plan for moving the faith down through the generations is the home. They would say that God’s primary plan for getting truth into the lives of teenagers is at the feet of their parents. But that does not mean most parents are fulfilling that role.

Youth leaders who think faith conversations are common in church families would be mistaken. According to research from Kara Powell, only one of eight teenagers talks about faith with mom, and even fewer talk with dad.⁶ The great majority of church parents now believe that taxi driving is their part in the discipling of their children. They believe their role is to drive children to church to be discipled by professionals. Fewer than 10 percent of active church families read the Bible together during a typical week or pray together apart from mealtime.⁷

A New Model

But change can come. After adopting a new model of youth ministry, a third of a workweek can give the youth leaders time to partner with other pastors and church leaders:

- to deepen parents’ walk with Jesus,
- to call out and teach parents how to lead spiritually at home,
- to equip parents to parent biblically, and
- to introduce parents outside the faith to Jesus.

That third of a workweek also can give youth leaders time to create more programs and events that bring parents and teenagers together. Leaders continually need to ask this question: “Considering the ministry objective before us at this moment, will we be better served to provide

a program/event for teenagers and their leaders or teenagers and their families?” In the most family-focused church, the answer some of the time will be a program/event for teenagers and their leaders.

But positive change in youth ministry will lead to far more family events than has been common in the past. That is because those specific events seem to have a better chance of leading teenagers toward lifetime faith and kingdom impact. That is true for teenagers in intact families and for spiritual “orphans” whom church families “adopt” for every family activity.

Beyond just attending and receiving, parents can support and serve in the church. They do so because they adore Christ and live under His reign. At the same time, parents can celebrate the fact that their faithful service makes more likely that their children will walk in faith for a lifetime. That is exactly what leaders observed in a recent study. Parr and Crites report:

The important thing to note here is that young adults remember the roles their parents played in church, whether they participated or refrained from involvement. It made an impression on them. They remember that their parents held important leadership positions and demonstrated commitment and spiritual maturity. The people who stayed in church had parents who were “all in.”⁸

Parents who never become official youth workers still can make eternal contributions to the lives of teenagers and families.

- Parents can share the good news of Christ with children and teenagers who do not yet know Him.
- Parents can ensure teenagers who do not yet follow Christ are welcomed and valued when the youth group gathers at church.
- Parents can speak truth to parents who would push such teenagers away.
- Parents informally can share truth with young believers who come under their roof.
- Parents can allow the Christian atmosphere of their home to make a lifetime impression on those who never see such a model. Parents can become intentional about letting others observe truth lived out in home relationships.
- Parents can help fill the emotional emptiness of children and teenagers who receive little love, affirmation, or focused attention in their own homes.
- Parents can become a prayer warrior for the teenagers who come to their home—in some cases becoming the only person who is bringing a child’s name before Christ.

In short, parents can see their home as a mission field and an expression of their personal call to ministry.

The goal of family ministry is not families sitting on the couch singing “Kumbaya.” The goal is families making disciples, locally and globally, for the glory of God. That also is the goal of the entire church. Spiritual practices in the home and more transformed family members are valuable because they prepare the saints for kingdom service.

Perhaps the most powerful thing church leaders can do to give teenagers a lifetime faith is to stimulate parents' spiritual pilgrimage. That is a new paradigm.

Youth Ministry That Links Teenagers with the Congregation

Most teenagers who leave high school with little love for the Bride eventually will wander away from the Groom.

Youth ministry authority Walt Mueller says:

It's ironic that one of the marks of today's emerging generations is a deep need for community and connectedness, and yet we plan and program in ways that cut them off from experiencing community and connectedness with people who aren't their own age. It's also ironic that while we say we want to see our kids embrace Jesus and mature into a deep faith that's integrated into all of life, we separate them from the wisest and most seasoned members of the body.⁹

Youth ministry professor Duffy Robbins adds:

We have unwittingly cultivated a congregational environment in which teenagers are being cut off from the very adult relationships that can sustain them through the turbulence of the adolescent years, and teach them about mature Christian faith. We are, in effect nurturing in teenagers an appetite for youth group (from which they will eventually graduate), while weaning them from involvement in the life of the broader church that can sustain their spiritual growth as adults.¹⁰

After conducting the National Study of Youth and Religion, Christian Smith concluded: "Teenagers . . . are structurally disconnected from the adult world. . . . But in terms of the implications of our work for churches, the two key words are engagement and relationships. It can't just be programs or classes. . . . Real change happens in relationships, and that takes active engagement."¹¹

Teenagers today go along and support church youth programs as long as there is a momentary payoff, such as fun trips, glitzy youth centers, and more time with peers. As teenagers develop new interests and begin to approach graduation, these momentary payoffs become less important, and they disappear from the church. They leave because they have experienced church mostly in teenage-only appendages but have not felt connected with the congregation. They leave, in part, because they have failed to build heart connections with a broad number of significant adults.

On the other hand, in both the Old and New Testaments, God's people usually appear in intergenerational relationships. "O God, You have taught me from my youth, and I still declare Your wondrous deeds. And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come" (Ps. 71:17–18 NASB).

Either through formal research or careful observation, many youth ministry influencers point to the value of teenagers who are connected to the full congregation. They report what we already know from Scripture. Churches with biblical, intergenerational relationships do, indeed, create believers with stronger faith.

Kara Powell: “Specifically, churches with close intergenerational relationships show higher faith maturity and vibrancy.”¹²

Chap Clark: “Transformation happens most deeply in the lives of teenagers when they are engaged in the broader life of the church and connected to a network of caring adults. . . . By being fully connected to, embraced by, and included in the historic body of Christ, adolescents can safely and securely transition into and become healthy adult believers.”¹³

Mark Cannister: “Nothing is more reflective of healthy student ministries than students who launch into the full and robust life of the church. In order for this to happen, though, the broader church must be prepared for and committed to receiving teenagers into its midst by valuing them for who they are and allowing them to contribute to the whole life of the church.”¹⁴

Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart: “When responsible adult leaders enter into the lives of students, they can help students take initial steps toward new levels of responsibility and self-reliance. Because the chief way students learn is through modeling others (usually Christian adults), it’s important that adults are caring enough to inspire and show the way for students.”¹⁵

David Kinnaman: “The Christian community is one of the few places on earth where those who represent the full scope of human life, literally from the cradle to the grave, come together with a singular motive and mission. . . . Flourishing intergenerational relationships should distinguish the church from other cultural institutions.”¹⁶

Lisa Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton: “[T]eenagers who were the most committed to their faith reported that, in addition to having parents and close friends who shared their beliefs, they were also connected to a faith community that provided ‘a welcoming, challenging atmosphere that values and integrates youth.’”¹⁷

Dan Dupee conducted informal, focus-group research with sixty-seven parents of collegians in nine groups over a period of five months. Dupee reports, “It lends power and credibility to the gospel message when . . . children see it embraced by people for whom they have affection and respect and who they know are genuinely interested not only in Jesus but in them.”¹⁸

Chap Clark’s book *Adoptive Youth Ministry* has sparked broad conversation. He makes a strong case for teenagers and members of the congregation adopting each other. Clark believes teenagers have much to give as well as receive, so he calls for mutual adoption.

Clark notes that Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the term *adoption* (*huiiothesia*). God the Father adopts believers into His eternal family, and He intends for these “siblings” to live in warm unity. Even more importantly, Clark calls every church to “a bridging ministry intent on moving the young beyond peer experienced faith by leading them into the welcoming

arms of the adoptive family of faith. The goal of even the best and most thriving youth ministry must be a strategic commitment toward authentic, inclusive and participatory adoption.”¹⁹

Youth leaders who adopt a new model of youth ministry may soon have a third of a workweek to commit to:

- multiplying mutual adoptions between teenagers and all ages of believers and
- calling out and equipping every teenager to take places of kingdom service with children or adults.

Youth Ministry Targeted Specifically to Teenagers

Mark Cannister notes, “There is a strong consensus among intergenerational specialists that while the church embraces intergenerational values, it is also essential to maintain important age-specific ministries.”²⁰

He also adds, “While everyone needs to be incorporated into a network of relationships that crosses generational boundaries, each age group must also be afforded a homogeneous context for developing peer relationships and working through issues relevant to their particular life stage.”²¹

The research project reported in the book *Why They Stay* found that “[a] young adult who attended a church with a ministry to students was more likely to have stayed as an adult, and one who attended a church without a ministry to students was more likely to have strayed.”²²

Churches should celebrate the youth leader who presents worship talks that are relevant to the specific issues of the teenage years. And they should celebrate:

- open-group Bible study that presents foundational concepts to all teenagers,
- intensive discipleship for those specific teenagers who have made a clear decision to follow Jesus,
- groups of teenagers who move out to make disciples locally and globally,
- teenagers who sacrificially and humbly meet the needs of others in the name of Jesus,
- and teenagers doing things that are fun and deepening relationships.

Ministry built around thirds still provides time for those elements. Time is also well spent on a few special youth events but only those that are strategic to creating lifetime disciples.

Implications for Reaching the Unreached

In addition to strengthening the faith of young believers, this model may accelerate the church sharing the gospel with and compassionately caring for teenagers outside the faith. At present, youth leaders are under pressure from congregations and parents to give almost full attention to spiritual formation and discipleship. That pressure flows from omnipresent pronouncements that church teenagers are spiritually malnourished and many are destined to leave the faith.

Paradoxically, the entities putting the pressure on the youth leaders are the very entities who have abdicated their roles in the spiritual formation of church teenagers. Regardless, the pressure is real, and it shapes the time commitments of many or most youth leaders. Mark Cannister observes:

While church leaders may feel that the youth ministry needs to reach out to teenagers in the community with the lifesaving message of the Gospel, they will almost always tend to appease the voices of parents who desire the youth ministry to nurture the children growing up in the church. In a reaction to the fear of losing the next generation, churches who once placed a high value on youth outreach have exchanged that value for one of nurturing the kids growing up in the church.²³

Fortunately, the situation is not hopeless. First, youth ministry in thirds can lead to:

1. Adults in the congregation who enter into mutual adoptions with teenagers—leading to more spiritually transformed teenagers
2. Teenagers who begin to serve side by side with the other generations of the church—leading to more spiritually transformed teenagers
3. Parents who themselves become more spiritually transformed—leading to more spiritually transformed teenagers
4. Parents who begin to take intentional steps to spiritually lead at home—leading to more spiritually transformed teenagers

Second, if congregations and parents begin to make much more of a difference in the spiritual lives of teenagers, that may take some of the pressure off of the youth leaders to do so. That reduction in pressure may allow youth leaders to shift more of their time and energy to gospel outreach and caring ministries outside the church. Cannister adds:

When adult education in the church takes seriously the training of parents to nurture their children in the faith, then youth leaders are free to go and reach out to the teenagers outside the walls of the church. If youth ministry is to regain its intended mission, the church must once again take seriously the training of parents to become the primary agents of faith formation for their children.²⁴

Most youth leaders love Jesus supremely and do their work tirelessly. But by employing a sixty-year-old model of youth ministry, the great majority of church teenagers are not becoming world-changing disciples as adults. Is the church willing to give up comfortable youth ministry and consider a radically new model that is likely to lead many more teenagers to lifetime faith?

Note: The concepts in this paper have been expressed more completely in the recently released book: Richard Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, seminaryhillpress.com.

Footnotes

1. Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 17.
2. “Research Shows Parenting Approach Determines Whether Children Become Devoted Christians,” April 9, 2007, barna.org; Christian Smith, email to Richard Ross, August 20, 2013. Both the Barna study and the NSYR arrived at the 10 percent figure, though they used slightly different criteria. In general, they found 10 percent of church teenagers can express their core beliefs, can lead someone else to saving faith, and choose to embrace Christ’s mission for their lives.
3. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120.
4. Ibid., 56.
5. Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing On the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Minnesota: Saint Mary’s Press, 2000), 85.
6. Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford, *Sticky Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 118.
7. George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2007), 31.
8. Steve R. Parr and Tom Crites, *Why They Stay: Helping Parents and Church Leaders Make Investments That Keep Children and Teens Connected to the Church for a Lifetime* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2015), 115.
9. Walt Mueller, “Why Youth Ministry Shouldn’t Be the Greatest Show on Earth,” June 1, 2017, cpyu.org.
10. Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry That Builds Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 102.
11. Christian Smith, quoted in Katelyn Beaty, “Lost in Transition,” *Christianity Today*, 53 (10): 34.
12. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 173.
13. Chap Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 137, 38.
14. Mark Cannister, *Teenagers Matter: Making Student Ministry a Priority in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 117.
15. Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, *Evangelism Remixed: Empowering Students for Courageous and Contagious Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 64.
16. David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2011) 203.

17. Lisa Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of American's Adolescents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70–71.
18. Dan Dupee, *It's Not Too Late* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 110.
19. Chap Clark, ed., “The Adoption Model of Youth Ministry,” *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), Kindle version.
20. Cannister, *Teenagers Matter*, 139.
21. *Ibid.*, 140.
22. Parr and Crites, *Why They Stay*, 105.
23. Mark Cannister, “Moana to the Rescue: Restoring the Adventure in Youth Ministry,” *YouthWorker Journal*, February 2017.
24. *Ibid.*

Appendix A

Implications for the Academy

If youth leaders were to implement youth ministry in thirds, they would need many new sets of competencies. Because these new competencies do not belong to the sixty-year-old model of youth ministry common today, they typically have not been taught in current undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Were youth ministry in thirds to become more common, members of the academy could consider adding competencies similar to the following to their degree programs.

Teenagers in Families

1. *Worship*—Competencies to guide families with teenagers to experience genuine worship
2. *Evangelism*—Competencies to prepare families with teenagers to tell others about Jesus
3. *Discipleship*—Competencies to disciple the members of families with teenagers
4. *Ministry*—Competencies to prepare families to minister to others in the name of Christ
5. *Community*—Competencies to build community within families with teenagers

Teenagers as Part of the Congregation

1. *Worship*—Competencies to guide teenagers to experience genuine worship as an integral part of the congregation
2. *Evangelism*—Competencies to prepare teenagers to link arms with the congregation to tell others about Jesus
3. *Discipleship*—Competencies to disciple teenagers through relationships with the congregation
4. *Ministry*—Competencies to prepare teenagers to link arms with the congregation to minister to others in the name of Christ
5. *Community*—Competencies to build community among teenagers and the other members of the congregation

Teenagers as a Youth Group

1. *Worship*—Competencies to see members of the youth group experience genuine worship
2. *Evangelism*—Competencies to prepare members of the youth group to tell others about Jesus
3. *Discipleship*—Competencies to disciple members of the youth group
4. *Ministry*—Competencies to prepare members of the youth group to minister to others in the name of Christ
5. *Community*—Competencies to build community among the members of the youth group

Appendix B

Top Ten Factors Leading to a Lifetime Faith and Love for the Church

A lifetime of study of Scripture, digesting research, and observing high school graduates leads this author to humbly suggest the top ten most important factors in developing a lifetime faith. The list presupposes a relationship with Jesus.

1. A teenager who shares a warm heart connection with a parent who is transparent about his/her adoration of God's Son, who embraces God's written Word, and who lives for the glory of God
2. A teenager who shares a life-on-life relationship with a discipler who adores Jesus and guides the teenager through a challenging, systematic discipleship process
3. A teenager who shares heart connections with many members of the congregation and who shares a mutual "adoption" with one or more adults who adore Jesus
4. A teenager who actively serves and sacrificially ministers with other generations as well as with peers
5. A teenager who actively participates in intergenerational worship on Sunday mornings
6. A teenager who knows how to correctly interpret Scripture and to pray and who takes responsibility for his/her own spiritual growth
7. A teenager confident about having conversations that include gospel sharing or call for a reasoned defense of the faith
8. A teenager who knows how to apply the principles of Scripture to his/her life while navigating a pluralistic culture
9. A teenager who approaches vocation and all of life with a sense of divine calling and an appreciation for his/her spiritual gifts
10. A teenager connected to significant adults who welcome and work together on doubts and questions

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